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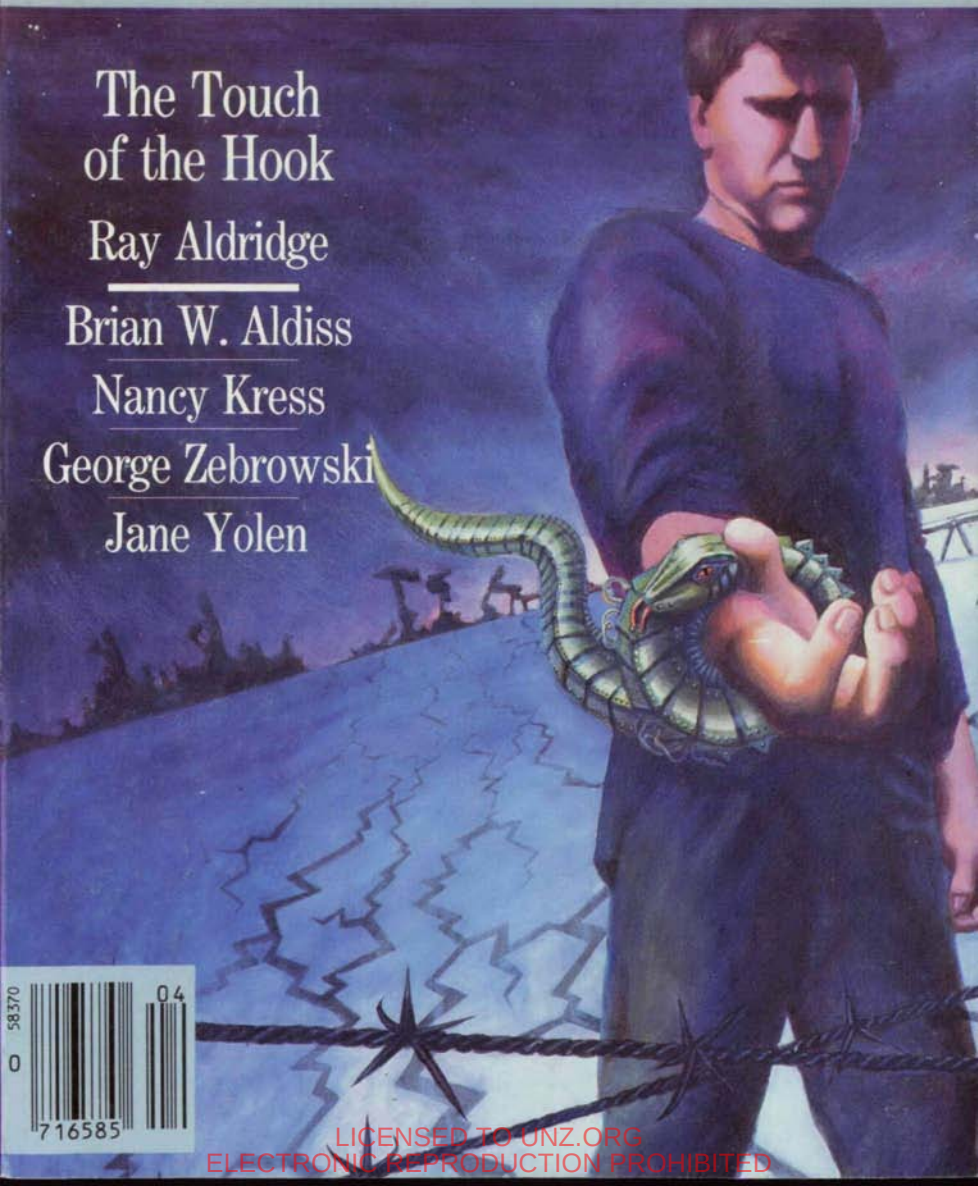

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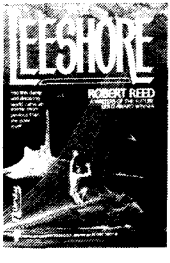

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Nancy Kress's last story for F & SF, "Out of All Them Bright Stars" (March 1985), was a Nebula award winner; and her new novel, AN ALIEN LIGHT, was recently published by Arbor House (reviewed in January 1988). Her new story is an offbeat and surprising variation of a familiar fairy tale.

Spillage

By Nancy Kress

WHEN THE COACH broke for the third time, the second coachman was flung sideways over the shrieking axle and down an embankment. He rolled in the moonless darkness, over and over, brambles tearing at the velvet of his livery and whipping across his face. He uttered no sound. There was water at the bottom, a desultory and dirty little stream: the coachman lay in it quietly, blinking in pain at the stars, blood trickling from one temple.

A rat fell on top of him, squeaked once, and scurried off into the brush.

From far above, the coachman heard a sudden feminine cry. It was not repeated, but after a while there came to his dazed ears a muffled sound, not quite footsteps, as if someone were dragging along the road above. *The lady in the coach, or the First Coachman himself* — The sound receded and died, and no other took its place.

He lay in the ditch without moving, at first frightened that some bone might have broken in the darkness without, later more frightened by

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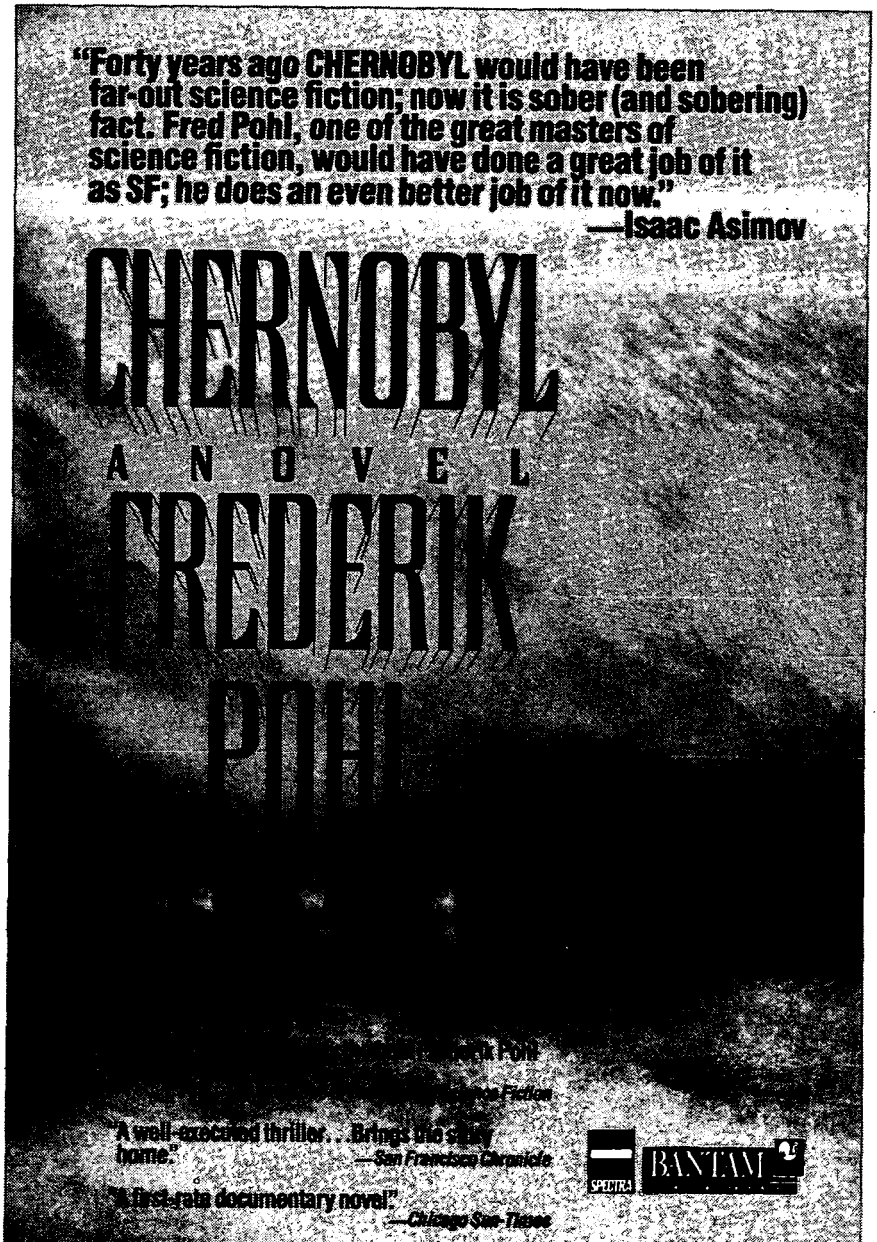
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the greater darkness within. No matter how hard he looked, there was nothing there. Not a name, not a place, not a history.

Only the lady in the coach, and the First Coachman: the lady more beautiful than stars, the First Coachman portly and sharp-eyed as he peered back over his shoulder at his apprentice hanging on behind, to make sure he was doing it right. He had been doing it right. He had stood tall and unsmiling on the perch; the jeweled night had flown past the shining sphere of the coach; the horses' hooves had struck sparks from the stone road. They had passed other coaches, each a glow in the darkness growing to an exhilarating rush of beast and metal, and then the thlock-thlock dying away behind, leaving the scent of perfume and oiled leather, with never a word spoken. And finally the destination: leaping from the perch to let down the carriage steps onto cobblestones so polished they reflected perfect rectangles of yellow light from the windows above. Lowered eyes and the lady's hand as she alighted, the rustle of silk glimpsed only at the hem, the small gloved hand briefly in his.

I am a coachman, he thought with relief, and searched for something else in the darkness, something more. There was nothing. He was a coachman, and that was all.

Too frightened to move, he lay in the wet ditch until he began to shiver. Water had soaked from velvet to skin. He sat up slowly, holding his head, and crawled out of the stream and back up the embankment. At first he wasn't sure he had reached the top. Sudden darkness, eclipsing the stars, rolled over him like fog.

He crouched by the road, not knowing where it led to, or from. Neither end reached his memory. Cold, bleeding, frightened, the coachman hunkered down into the long grass. His hand touched something nasty: pulpy and wet. He jerked his fingers away and wiped them on his ruined livery.

When dawn came, he saw that it was a shattered pumpkin, and next to it lay a slipper of glass.

The village lay at one end of the stone road. He reached it after hours of walking in the direction opposite to the long skid of coach wheels, his belly rumbling and the midsummer sun too bright and hot in his eyes. When he tried to shade them with one hand, the hand stopped five inches from his face.

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A bulky woman drawing water from a well looked up and burst into laughter.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, it's just . . . your nose. . . ." She went off again, backing a little away from him, her gray eyes wide with mirthful fear.

The coachman touched the end of his preposterous nose and opened his mouth to say — what? — and found that he was mute. There were words in his head, but none left through his lips.

The woman stopped laughing as jerkily as she had begun. Too carefully, she set the bucket on the lip of the well and walked closer. She was not young. There were lines around her eyes, and heaviness in the solid set of each foot on the earth. In her voice he heard again the fear. It was the sound of the breaking axle, the brambles on the embankment.

"They're careless up there, sometimes, with the . . . with that. It doesn't always go cleanly. Bits and pieces get . . . spilled over."

He stared at her, having no idea what she meant, saying nothing.

I am a coachman.

As if he had spoken aloud, she said with sudden brutality, "Not anymore you aren't. Not here."

Picking up her bucket, she started toward the village. The coachman stared after her dumbly, hands dangling loose at his sides, belly rumbling. She had gone nearly beyond hearing before calling roughly over her shoulder, "You can go the baker's. Last house on the left. He needs a man for rough work, and he doesn't. . . . You can ask, anyway. Before you fall over."

She walked away. The weight of the water bucket made her broad hips roll. Hair straggled from its topknot in wispy hanks. Her back bent as if from more than the bucket, as if in pain.

The baker hired him at two pence a week, with as many stale rolls as he could eat and a pallet in the kitchen. After staring a full minute at the coachman's nose, and at his inept gesture that was supposed to indicate dumbness, the baker hardly ever glanced at him again. Monthly the bakery sank a little deeper into the compost of debt; monthly the baker himself became more nearly as silent as his wretched hireling.

The coachman worked all day within an arm's reach of the sagging kitchen hearth, where no one saw him and he saw no one. There he mixed, scrubbed, kneaded, swept, hauled, mended, and baked. He didn't mind the

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hard labor; he scarcely noticed it. There was an embankment in his mind.

Again and again he sped through the jeweled night, behind the gleaming coach and the silken lady. Again and again came the thlock-thlock of the horses, the lady's hand in his as she stepped onto the cobblestones, the rectangles of yellow light — until the embankment loomed and he fell.

At night the hearth grew cold, and the coachman lay in darkness and breathed in the powdery tickle of floating ash. Sometimes he wondered why he had left the slipper of glass; why he had not taken it with him away from the embankment. There was no answer.

At the end of a month, the woman from the well bustled through the baker's kitchen door, stooping under the splintered lintel. She wore a clean apron and carried a pile of brown cloth.

"I brought you a shirt. Velvet doesn't wear at all, does it? This was my late husband's; you're of a size, I think. Try it."

The coachman did, torn between gratitude and irritation. The brown wool felt clean and warm against his arms. When he saw the woman staring at his thin chest, he turned his back to do up the laces.

"Good enough," she said briskly. "Tomorrow I can bring the breeches. You look queer enough with wool above and velvet below." She laughed, an unmusical booming straight from the belly, then abruptly fell silent.

The coachman had no choice but to be silent.

Finally the woman said, "I'm called Meloria."

The flowery name made her ridiculous. The coachman nodded and smiled, pantomiming thanks for the shirt. He could not have told his name even had he known it. Meloria regained her briskness as abruptly as she had lost it, and bustled out the door. Even without a bucket full of water, she waddled.

The coachman thought of the small gloved hand, a slim ankle beneath lifted silk.

He kneaded the bread.

Meloria came the next day with the brown wool breeches, on the day after that with stout boots. A hat to keep off rain. A sour-grape pie, a plaid blanket, a pillow stuffed with pine needles, a yellow cheese.

"You look like you need this," she would boom, and the coachman, who did need that, would smile weakly and nod two or three times. He was fall-

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ing off another embankment, or was being pushed. He saw the edge clearly, but not how to avoid it. The shining boots of his livery had fallen apart. The nights had grown colder. When he looked at the sour-grape pie, after weeks of stale rolls, his mouth filled with a savage juice.

After she had gone, he swept the hearth sullenly, not caring that cinders flew up into the air and floated down again, ashy gray snow, on the cooling rolls.

One night he dreamed. After he had lowered the steps to the cobblestones, he turned around to look toward the yellow light. It came from a fortress, windows blazing with candles, gates thrown wide. As he gazed, he felt a touch on his shoulder. It was the lady's hand; she stood behind him, and he could see just the tips of her gloved fingers, delicate as white moths. He turned, her perfume taking him first, to smile on her face.

Moonlight woke him. It fell through the baker's broken window, full on the coachman's face. Blinking into that cold and colorless light, he saw a rat creep along the hearth. Its fur was matted in mangy patches around an open sore. The coachman leapt up and began flailing at it with the poker, murderous despairing blows he did not understand, nor try to. The rat screamed and escaped between damp stones, but not before the poker struck the last third of its tail and smeared it, hairless and pulpy pink, across the floor. The poker clanged and dented.

The coachman sank to his knees and noiselessly wept.

In midwinter the kingdom held a festival. Even in this mean village, under the hunger moon, there were feasts and fires and the pervasive scent of wine mulled with spices.

"Sundown. At Meloria's," the baker growled at noon on the second day of the festival. The coachman, who was breaking the ice on a pail of water and who had all but forgotten what the baker's voice sounded like, looked up in surprise.

"She says," the baker said, and smirked.

The coachman shook his head.

I am a coachman.

The baker smirked again.

Nonetheless, he went. The night was clear and star-sharp, the ashes in the hearth had gone cold, the whole village smelled of cooking, and in

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Meloria's cottage window shone a yellow light.

"I'm glad you've come," Meloria said, and handed him a cup of steaming wine, red and hot in his bare hands. "Drink to midwinter's passing!"

He did. They ate, a greedy sating with meat pies, new bread, fruits stewed in wine and honey, gravy and fowl and soup and ripe cheeses and wine, always wine, more wine.

"Drink to midwinter," Meloria said.

While they ate, there was no talk. Juice ran down their chins, rich grease slicked their fingers, succulent skin crackled in their teeth. When they had finished and the table lay stained and bone-strewn as a battlefield, Meloria talked as the coachman could not.

She spoke slowly, in her plain unmusical voice, of growing up a tenth daughter of twelve girls, of marrying her husband, of their childlessness, of his death. He had been struck by lightning from a blue sky. The coachman half listened, his belly tight as a drum, his mind a slow empty whirling of wine-colored sparkles. Only when she spoke of her childlessness did he rouse a little, at something new in her voice, something splintered that made him frown and look across the table with fuddled eyes.

"Drink to midwinter," Meloria said, and the splintered tone, which had reminded him of something, was gone.

Later — how much later, he didn't know — he woke. It was unaccustomed warmth that woke him, as shocking after his hearth and cinders as would have been ice water. Meloria's vast breasts lay against his cheek. Blue lines dribbled across their fatty slackness. He shifted a little, and the breath came to him from her open mouth, heavy and stale with used wine.

His stomach lurched.

He made it out of the bed but not out of the cottage. Vomit spewed onto the hearth, making a paste of cinders. When the racking heaves became too bad, the coachman dropped to his hands and knees, naked on the stone, long nose inches from the floor. Eventually the last of the wine came up, a thin pink trail across the stone.

I am a coachman —

When he could stand, he fetched water, cleaned the hearth, and dressed with trembling fingers. A gray winter dawn had drained all color from the village, and all sound. It was only hours later, well along the road, that he thought it odd that Meloria had not been wakened by his retching, and hours after that before he remembered that she had, and that he had seen

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in her eyes, staring sightlessly at the roof, that splintered thing: the breaking axle, the brambles on the embankment.

Her dead husband's boots were better than his living ones had been; they kept his feet dry the whole long day.

The fortress stood hard-lined against the gray dusk, spilling no rectangles of light onto the cold cobblestones. But the coachman had no time to ponder this; at almost the moment he trudged in view of the nearest tower, he was seized by two armed soldiers. They dragged him into the fortress. He was taken first before a young captain with close-cropped hair and jawline like an erection, who brought him before. . . .

"A stranger, my prince. Creeping by the edge of the castle road, in cover of the trees. And he will say nothing."

"And of her tracks you found —"

The captain looked at the floor.

"*You found* —"

"Nothing yet, my prince. But this man —"

The prince made a chopping gesture, and the captain was silent. Everyone stood absolutely still except the coachman, who fearfully raised his eyes for a first look at the prince, and the prince himself, who frowned. The coachman dropped his eyes and shuddered.

"Two days."

"Yes, my prince."

"*This* time."

"Yes, my prince."

"I want her found *now*. And if anything has happened to the child. . . ."

"Yes, my prince."

The prince put out one hand in a useless, unfinished gesture. The hand was strong and brown, with tiny golden hairs at the wrist and a single, square-cut ring carved with a wax seal.

"How does she go? And why?" On the last word his voice splintered, and no one answered.

"Can you talk, man?" the prince said to the coachman, who shook his head.

"Not even sounds?"

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The coachman remembered the sounds of his retching, but did nothing.

"Have you come here at anyone else's bidding?"

The captain shifted his weight, not quite impatiently. The prince ignored him. The coachman shook his head.

"Did you see anyone on the road? Anyone or . . . anything? Anything unusual?"

The captain said, "My prince, we don't even know if he lied when he answered the first question. Perhaps he can talk and perhaps he cannot. I can find that out easily enough, if you will but leave him to me. . . ."

The prince raised the coachman's chin with one fist and looked steadily into his eyes, shadowed blue into muddy brown. The coachman stepped back a pace. The inside of his head shouted — *I am a coachman!* — but no words came.

"No," the prince said finally. "Can't you tell by looking that he is harmless? Because if you cannot, Captain, if you must substitute force for sight, you are not as much use to me as if —"

He did not finish. A great commotion moved through the corridor beyond, and a page ran into the room. "She is found! She is found!"

The prince bolted for the door. Before he could reach it, a second captain entered, older than the first, carrying the limp body of a woman. The first captain bit his lip and scowled. The prince took the lady into his own arms and laid her on a low couch. The coachman saw in a daze that she was heavily pregnant, and dressed in rags. Without volition, he glanced at her ankle, bare now, and dirty under the torn skirt.

When she opened her eyes, they were the same clear blue as the prince's. He said gently, and even the coachman saw how the gentleness could not quite cover the anguish, "Another fit."

"Yes," she said, and then in a rush: "I'm sorry, love! I don't remember!"

"Not anything? Not how you left the castle, or why, or . . . or this?" He touched the rags she wore.

"No," the lady said, and in the sound of her voice the coachman lay again in the wet ditch, blackness without, even more within.

The prince held her tighter. "Are you hurt anywhere?"

"No, I . . . no. Just very tired. I was asleep this time, I think, when it came over me."

"And *no one* saw? Your women, the men-at-arms —"

"No. Please — it wasn't their fault, don't. . . . I don't know how I went

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past them all, but I know it was not their fault. It was —"

Her voice faltered. The prince murmured against her hair, his face hidden. The younger captain, who had begun to sweat when the prince said, 'the men-at-arms,' seized the coachman's arm with one hand and the page's with the other and pushed them from the room. The older captain followed, closing the door.

"Where this time?" the younger demanded.

"In the forest. Like before. But she could not have been there more than a few minutes; she would have frozen, in those rags at midwinter."

The other swore. "And *she* will be queen."

The older man pursed his mouth disapprovingly, an odd look for a soldier, and said nothing. The coachman saw again the tightening of the prince's arm around the lady, the trembling of the square-cut ring.

The first captain said, too hastily, "Not that I would speak any word against such a beautiful and virtuous princess!"

The other man merely smiled.

"Well, you two get out!" the first captain shouted. He shoved the page between the child's shoulder blades, and kicked the coachman with his boot. The blow caught the coachman behind the left knee, which buckled. "You heard me — get out or you'll wish you had!"

The page scurried away. The coachman staggered to his feet and took one step before the knee collapsed for a second time. The captain kicked him again.

"Enough," said the older man. "You know he don't like that. Nor she either."

The other looked sullen. The coachman put both palms flat against the wall, bit his tongue, and heaved himself upright. Through a gray haze, he followed the page down the corridor, onto the cobblestones. The early dark of midwinter had fallen; yellow rectangles of light lay on the cobblestones under the cold moon.

Limping along the road, he nearly froze; not moving he surely would have. He had no tinder to make a fire, no coals, no flint. There was moonlight, this time, enough to see, but by the time he came to the place where the shoulder of the road dropped into a steep embankment, he was beyond seeing. He moaned, when the chattering of his teeth and the shivering of his bones let him, and he kept his feet more or less on the

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road even when he fell into it. But he saw neither the road nor the embankment, bristling with frozen weeds like little spears. He saw darkness, and a rushing jeweled night, and the shining sphere of the coach . . . and something more.

Presently his moaning grew. It became muttering, and the muttering grew to the frozen shapes of deformed words.

"Spilled over. Bits and pieces of magic . . . spilled over. Bits and pieces and pieces. . . ."

He fell down, and this time could not rise, although he tried. Once he put out his hand and groped on the icy roadway, his fingers splayed and bent as if he expected to touch something softer, nastier.

"I am a coachman!" he shouted to the thing that was not there. Body and mind gave out; laying his cheek against the frost, he closed his eyes.

The coach, and the exhilarating rush of horses in the jeweled night, and the thlock-thlock dying away behind. But the thlock-thlock grew louder, and a shape catapulted out of the darkness.

"Oh, no, no —"

Meloria dismounted, all but falling off the borrowed ass, and lifted the coachman. He was nearly too heavy for even her strength and mass, but somehow — heaving, pushing, cursing, sweating — she wrestled him across the back of the mangy ass. She rubbed his hands and cheeks; she raged at his stupidity; she pried open his mouth and scalded his throat with hot soup. She wept and cursed and waddled along the road, leading the ass, carrying the coachman away from the embankment steep in the frozen moonlight.

"It was you," the coachman said when he finally woke again in the cottage, under piles of stifling blankets. Then he realized: slowly his fingers went to his lips where the words had appeared, and he looked at Meloria in hatred and fear.

She took a step away from him and studied a crack in the hearth.

"I can speak."

She said nothing, watching him from the corner of her eye.

"Your doing."

"No."

"Then bits and pieces. Spillage. Like the other. 'When they're careless.' That's what you said."

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"Yes," Meloria answered, looking suddenly older, suddenly weary. In the one word the coachman heard again the breaking of the axle, the tearing of the brambles on the embankment.

He turned his head away from her, and saw that he lay on the hearth, as close to the fire as possible. It burned too hot. He yanked the blankets down from his chin; under them, he discovered, he was naked.

Suddenly he shouted, as he had on the road, "I am a coachman!"

"Not before me, you were not."

He jerked his head around so quickly that the bones in his neck snapped. Meloria said it again, in a rougher voice:

"Not before me, you were not. No more than *she* was . . . what she is."

He said, in a perfect rage, "She changes back! Without warning, without help, and then he can't even find her!"

"He always does."

"He —"

"Would she have been better off without me, without any of it, as she was before? Without him or the child? Without even those dangerous bits

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and pieces. Just because the magic goes away sometimes — would she have been better off without it entirely?"

He was tired. His knee was in pain, and his neck hurt where it had snapped, and a great listlessness came over him, as if the cold had claimed him on the road after all, as if Meloria had not come. He closed his eyes. After a while he could hear Meloria moving around the cottage preparing food, drawing water, clanking a pot down on a table with clumsy, heavy movements.

She drew the blankets back up to his chin.

The coachman opened his eyes and looked up at her. Meloria set her lips hard together. Her chin quivered.

"None of us is that free of spillage. None. Not even . . . such as I."

The coachman nodded. He raised one hand and touched her cheek. It took all the strength he had, without and within, more strength even than not remembering what had hurled after him down the embankment. Then he closed his eyes, exhausted, and slept.

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"Funnier than the Bible."
—the editor

"I liked it better than *War and Peace.*"
—the author's mother

"Doug Adams, eat your heart out."
—the author's father

If you like *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy...*

Then you'll flip for...

THE LIGHT FANTASTIC
By TERRY PRATCHETT

In Discworld, magic is commonplace, luggage walks upon tiny feet, dragons soar the skies, and you really *can* fall off the edge of the world. Rincewind, a bumbling and cowardly wizard, wanders too close to the world's rim and finds himself teetering. Far from being the end of his adventures, the real excitement has just begun as Rincewind, the most unlikely savior you'll ever meet, has to work the One Great Spell if Discworld is to be saved from impending doom.

"Pratchett is the Douglas Adams of fantasy."
—*Knave*

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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

Some Thoughts on The Topic, Algis Budrys. Published here for the first time

WELL, FOLKS, the first book I attempted to read this month was about a prehistoric young man whom the wicked shaman had displaced from his rightful inheritance as the son of the recently deceased chief of the Tiger Clan. In fact, the chief was found dead with tiger claw marks all over him (plus a knife-wound no one else but his son noticed), and the same has recently been true of all the chief's supporters. The shaman now rules the clan, and has even taken the lad's mother to wife.

As the book opens, the lad finds himself rescuing a boy member of the despised Toad Clan from deadly peril, and in the process also preserves a badly wounded lion cub. There is a pause for speeches in which all of the above *realpolitik* is worked in during bindings up of wounds, etc., and then the hero carries the other two into Tiger territory. But all three, sore beset, are immediately kicked out into the snow and gloom for associating with lions, though at the last moment our hero's mother manages to press a bundle of food and clothing into his arms.

And so it goes. Now, clearly, in the end you would expect the hero to expose the scheming shaman, and slay his tame tiger with the aid of the Toad and the now full-grown and blindly loyal lion, and much of that occurs. But the shaman gets away because the author and his publisher hope to sell you another book in this series.

The popularity of *The Clan of The Cave Bear* has much to answer for, but I believe the author's prose style is individual to her, at least now that James Fenimore Cooper has been gathered to his reward*

And then there was the rather

*You do realize that he was plain Jim Cooper around his home folks. (I have just re-read Sam Clemens' commentary on Cooper's literary offenses, and though my ribs have stopped aching again, the memory is yet fresh in my mind.)

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promising one with the good first couple of pages, its language quite serviceable, about the lost colony where the humans have to sing to the peculiar local geological features in order not to be scragged by them. I wasn't having more than a little trouble following the rationale, and it looked as if this one might be a keeper. But then the singer's young wife turned out to be an agonizing shrew, and much taken by his flashy older brother, and the singer turned out to be the sort of person who ensures his nobility by suffering patiently. So it began to dawn on me that the SF in this one existed only to support the soap opera, and we lost the second of the three candidates I had set aside for this month's column.

The third was about an exploratory party landing on one of those apparently pastoral planets that turns out to be Not What it Seems, and I was beginning to get rather apprehensive early on. But the ecology was actually intriguing and ingeniously conceived, while the prose was, by God, distinguished. Ah, *here*, I said to myself, is what I'm going to write about. I said this to myself because I had become seriously concerned for the state of my persiflage-detector. I don't normally go through a pile of the month's books, select the ones that look possible, and find that 66% of them are outright duds. With this last one, I had redeemed myself in my eyes to some extent, though I think we're going to spread the circuit-diagram out on the drawing board real soon now and attempt to figure out which resistor may be weakening.

Well, anyway, we were sailing along rather well, and all the bumps and scrapes on the hull were caused by the typographical errors in the galley proofs, which began badly in that respect. The author's presentation of his milieu was subtle — perhaps a shade too enigmatic in places, but, then, it's a first novel — and the publisher's apparently unproofread text was creating all sorts of glitches. But I was reasoning my way around them, and planning a paragraph about the unique perils of someone with above-average prose talent and above-average Sfnal ideation. It's not the authors of soap opera, far-future or far-past, who lose anything important by slipshod text production; it's the people who most deserve care and encouragement.

But the publisher's sabotage of his own product didn't stay at that level. It got worse and worse, and finally began breaking up my ability to hold the story in my mind. So I may eventually get through the text, but I'll have to wait for a production copy and review the book

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then ... assuming, of course, that it was ultimately proofread at *some* stage.

And here we are. I could salvage these experiences by creating detailed negative reviews of the first two books, but even this customary fallback position is denied me by the fact that I can't find any way in which that would be of direct service to their authors, or to you. The *Cave Bear* readers are going to get the one book anyhow, and perhaps appreciate it all the more for recycling the same old tried-and-true ingredients, and the handkerchief-wringer scenario of the other is also beyond all appeals to mere taste and reason.

So I am going to talk about books, the topic, as distinguished from books, the things.

Why are there books? Well, there are books intended to educate. Although these frequently inform us more on the condition of the author's rational faculties than they do on their nominal subject, some of these do serve that purpose. I still have, up in the attic, a book I read as a boy, called I believe *Indians of The Rivers, Forests and Plains* by two people named Holling or Hollings. This is a very well illustrated volume from which I learned any number of things that have stuck with me I suppose forever. I know how to erect a wickiup, make a fish-trap, build a birch-bark canoe and otherwise employ that material's properties to make a cooking pot and jacklight deer. From that book, I also learned how to tan a deerhide by chewing it, and how to make a hunting bow.* (But I forget how to make arrow-shafts and fletch them, nor have I ever succeeded in chipping flint into any recognizable object, much less an arrowhead or knife). I know how to stampede buffalo over a cliff for dinner and robes, and how to make an ocean-going dugout canoe from which one could hunt whale (if one knew how to make a harpoon-head). A useful book, the thought of whose lore has tided me over many a Missile Crisis, though I did have to cling to the hope that the last girl

It's not done by whittling on a sapling; you take your carefully selected split-out billet of close-grained wood that you've been keeping warm, dry, and unwarped in your wickiup for a season or two and, provided it still balances in the middle now that it's aged, you go to work on that with your flint drawknife, eventually taking very slim cuts indeed and checking for symmetrical taper quite meticulously. Ie., a well-made Iroquois bow was worth, in its economic system, about as much as a concert quality violin is in ours. Possessing one must have been a boy's dream equivalent to yearnings for a '57 Chevvy.

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in the world would also be really great with flint, as well as one or two things that don't normally chip.

Most of the other informative books I have read in my life have not been as useful, and a great deal more confusing, in the sense that what is solemnly presented today as the definitive thinking on a particular matter is almost invariably tomorrow's poppycock. There is nothing so shamefacedly naked as Deep Thought worn threadbare on the bed of the river of time. The worse thing about that is having been around long enough to observe that the process repeats; today's proof of poppycock is itself poppycock.

What I am asserting here is that while a library is preferable to a parking lot except, perhaps, on Saturday afternoons at the supermarket, what is enshrined there is often the antithesis of what is enshrined there. Well, all right; a shrine to antithesis says at least that a culture values something above barbarity (but choose your billets also for grain that runs the long way, not diagonally or across).

O.K., fiction. Ah, why is there fiction? That would at first seem like a dumb question, but I have to tell you that while I'm still not at all puzzled about why people write fiction, I have become increasingly curious as to what in the world makes people hire experts to do their imagining for them.

What is it that has created a huge body of fiction-consumers over the impressive span of time since the first individual got the idea of begging for alms by telling it to them?

There are several customary features of fiction that are clearly not the crucial ones. Characterization per se, for instance, or scenario — probably as distinguished from plot. It seems reasonable to assume that one cannot grasp what one cannot imagine for oneself, and so the essential ingredient in fathoming a fictional character is one supplied by the reader. The same appears true for the phenomena associated with finding the intrinsic significance in an event; that is, a segment of that series of specifically depicted events which, when complete, is called a scenario. To properly assimilate that, the reader has to already have a sufficient body of remembered life-experience, and if he doesn't have that relevant experience, he can't actually understand what's happening. It seems quite logical to presume that the reader would rather deal with scenarios built only on whatever experience he does have . . . and those would be scenarios best created by him, and especially not by some acute, ex-

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perienced depictor of life.*

Plot is something else than scenario, and its existence in fiction may be the key. The existence of plot as we know it is a relatively recent development, and it's possible John Campbell was right when he asserted it was a consequence of monotheism.

We often speak, loosely, of the "plot" of a Greek play or of an epic like The Odyssey. But what we're actually talking about there, I think, is the scenario. When there are a whole parcel of gods and demigods presumed to be meddling with our lives then neither human career-plans nor even ethics can be assumed to determine what will become of us in any given situation, or in the sum of our situations.

In that sort of belief-system, survival is essentially out of the hands of the survivor, and it's normal to keep one's behavior pretty elemental, since the gods will supply complications for us and it's obviously inadvisable to take the chance of recomplicating them.

But if there is only one Supreme Creator who built the clock and started it running, matters become quite different. Either The God has a detailed plan for each individual or the system has a plan to which the individual must fit himself if he is to remain worthy of the consequent benefits.

In the first case, life is a matter of keeping one's nose clean, and in the second it is a matter of keeping one's nose clean. Most people waver between one view of what's going on and the other, but the upshot is that a person is in some way responsible to something very strict; the sweat of one's brow, and maintaining correct ethics, attain vital importance . . . even for those who believe that there may or may not be a God, but there certainly is a clock running. Survival information then becomes quite precious to the individual as a personally relevant thing,* and the existence of cause-

*Which of course does explain why smash best-sellers are usually simple bits of business. But it doesn't explain why there are best-sellers at all, since if we follow only this chain of reasoning, the most popular book would be the one that utterly didn't exist. But perhaps the logic of true best-seller fiction has the sort of threshold Heisenberg postulates for the physical universe; past a certain point, the very act of attempting to apply fact-detection shifts the truth-particles (veritons!) targetted by it.

*This leads to an interesting digression. It seems possible that the original audiences for epic recountings and Greek plays were primarily fascinated by the author's hypotheses, as distinguished from truly identifying with the principal characters and temporarily taking on their attributes. That is, in the ideal case under this view, audiences in classical times were composed entirely of critics.

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and-effect tends to become a basic and unquestioned assumption.

Modern story-plotting is aimed at total audience-involvement, and seems to have evolved, rather swiftly — and most particularly in Protestant cultures — in response to audience demand. Fiction since the Reformation has held and developed its place by offering simplified models of cause-and-effect in a universe where things are too complicated in reality for anyone to be *exactly* sure of why something occurred... whereas the belief system implies to many that an exact knowledge is required of every individual, while it implies to many others that an exact explanation is at least possible. And social milieux — I really am getting in deep, here; if I didn't already have so many footnotes, this would have been another — social milieux, as I was saying, are now recomplicating themselves to the point where most of us agree it's not even possible to be exactly sure of *what* happened, and certainly not of why it did. So models of reality become even more desirable. And they become desirable not because there is anything in them that we cannot imagine, but because they contain imaginable things we in our one lifetime do not expect to have time to imagine, but feel we ought to.

Extended models — that is, books as distinguished from shorter fiction forms, and certainly as distinguished from the allusive images of poetry — would tend to rule the marketplace.

And I think that is why there are books, why there are a lot of books, and why so many of them run or lurch along the ground rather than soar.*

And by that token, I definitely ought to have given you reviews of at least the first two books noted here. But there will be others exactly like them along in a minute, and in any case there is a threshold beyond which the mind of man is not meant to go.

**It is also why fiction is more relevant than nonfiction, and why there are the kinds of science fiction and fantasy we see today.*

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Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Welcome To Moonbase, Ben Bova (Ballantine, Trade Paper, 255 pp, $9.95)

HERE IT is — the book that *should* win the Hugo for best non-fiction book of 1987. I'm astonished that no one thought of doing this before; but I'm glad they didn't, since I can't imagine anyone doing it better than Ben Bova.

Welcome To Moonbase is a document from the future — the actual handbook that will be handed to newcomers who have just arrived, preparing them to get along in the lunar colony.

Bova is America's foremost advocate of space exploration, and in this book he makes his case for building a moonbase by showing what it would be like if we already had it. Best of all, it doesn't feel like propaganda. It feels like reality. It makes you contemplate life on the moon as if you faced it today. It isn't all technospeak, either. You get the rules for sports like linear football and 3-D basketball — as well as human-powered flight and the Kilroyesque activities of the First Footprints Club.

Now that it exists, I can't imagine any serious science fiction writer attempting to depict lunar life without this book in hand. Nor can I imagine a long-time science fiction reader who would not be intrigued and entertained by browsing through it. I only wish we could require that no Congressman be allowed to vote on space legislation until he's read *Welcome To Moonbase*.

On Stranger Tides, Tim Powers (Ace, cloth, 325 pp, $16.95)

One of my favorite books in my early reading years was Rafael Sabatini's *Captain Blood*. Later I came to love other seafaring stories — the Hornblower books, Nordhoff's and Hall's Bountry trilogy — but the swashbuckling tale of the innocent Irish doctor who ended up living a life of piracy in the Caribbean is still magical to me. No other novel has conjured up that same romantic fire in my imagination that comes from that mixture of the freedom of

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the sea, the camaraderie of lost and hunted men, and the swift brutal danger of broadside, grapple, and boarding on the open sea.

Until now. Tim Powers is the apostle of gonzo history, and *On Stranger Tides* is as good as storytelling ever gets. He has found a way to bring together powerful Indian magic, black vodun, a British scientist driven mad with grief over his wife's death, and Blackbeard himself, determined to live forever. Opposing them all is John Chandagnac, a one-time puppeteer who has come to the Caribbean to confront the uncle who cheated John's father out of his rightful inheritance. Captured by pirates, John finds himself rechristened Jack Shandy; he also finds that his old skill as a puppeteer can save his life.

I wish I could give a balanced review by pointing out the flaws in this book. But I didn't find any. Powers writes in a clean, elegant style that illuminates without slowing down the tale. The story promises marvels and horrors, and delivers them all. You'll love the characters, you'll stay awake all night reading it, and when you finally do sleep, you'll find this story playing through your dreams.

Buy it in hardcover. You'll want it to have a permanent place on your shelves. I can't wait for my kids to get old enough for me to give them this book — it will do for them what *Captain Blood* did for me.

True Jaguar, Warren Norwood (Bantam Spectra, paper, 336 pp, $3.95)

A few years ago, a few fantasy writers noticed that standard medieval fantasies were getting boring. They all seemed to take place in the same generic setting: Sir Percy All-Purpose sallies forth with a mixed-species questing party to destroy the Dread Wizard Standarre de Cliche living in No-Name Castle. All the elves are tall and beautiful (thanks, Tolkien!), and all the women are strong-thewed, with thick and dangerous swords (hi there, Bella!).

Some solved the problem by making it all into a joke, thus creating the subgenre of Lite Fantasy, in which the story is still composed of cliches, but the author nudges you with his elbow to let you know you're *supposed* to laugh.

Others dug in, did their research, and tried to make the medieval setting real and fresh again. Well, not fresh — usually a dose of reality included the heady scent of unwashed bodies and the pleasures of a slog through mid-avenue sewage. But it works.

Still others decided that if the

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medieval European setting was stale, why not move somewhere else? Often the results were like painting a new diorama and then having the same actors go through the same old story in front of it. But sometimes the results have been dazzling. I think of Megan Lindholm's *Wizard of the Pigeons*, which takes place on the streets of modern Seattle, or Terry Bisson's *Talking Man*, starring a Tennessee junkyard wizard, or Tim Power's Caribbean pirate fantasy *On Stranger Tides*.

Now let me tell you about a novel whose setting is even more marvelously strange: Warren Norwood's *True Jaguar*. The narrator is a New Mexico Amerindian who always thought his name was Jesus O'Hara Martinez — or, well, J. Martin O'Hara, when he had to work among Anglos. But his life goes to hell when a tough little Maya named Reyes informs him that he's a son of True Jaguar, and his mission in life is to go into the underworld, defeat the Lords of Xibalba, and thereby destroy a comet that is on a collision course with Earth.

Norwood's story is brash and believable and strange even while it's still taking place on the surface, in our "reasonable" world, where O'Hara's only enemies are paranoid U.S. security forces. It only gets better when the tale goes underground.

But the real miracle of this book is that when Norwood used Mesoamerican myth he did *not* anglicize it. The myths don't follow sensible and familiar European patterns. There's a quest going on, but nobody has even the teeniest idea what they have to do to win. No ring to throw into the cracks of doom. Just a river of blood and a river of pus to cross, and a houseful of animated knives on the other side. O'Hara and his companions don't know anything except that the Lords of Xibalba aren't actually gods (that's a comfort), and there's a hope that maybe if they can get them to play basketball instead of Mayan deathball, the mortals might live long enough to figure out how to stop the comet.

It sounds like a story where anything can happen — which usually means that you don't *care* what happens. But I *did* care. I liked these people. And for the first time in I don't know how long, a fantasy novel *surprised* me, again and again, and yet ended up feeling absolutely right.

All you lackwit fantasists who would have a stroke if an original idea accidently lodged in your brain — yes, you, the ones who are still using those tatty little stage sets left over from major productions by Tolkien and Mallory — hear this: Warren Norwood's got a brand new

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original fantasy world you can trace or xerox or graft from. Heck, if you've got any talent at all, you can shoplift enough material from *True Jaguar* to keep you in trilogies for a decade.

A Mask For The General, Lisa Goldstein (Bantam Spectra, cloth, 208 pp, $14.95)

It's a common theme in science fiction, but one that is rarely done well: America in the near future is ruled by a dictator, and the hero of the story becomes part of a revolutionary underground. Most writers, from *Revolt in 2100* to the movie *Red Dawn,* have a naive view of this situation: the dictator's forces are invariably inept, corrupt, or riddled with revolutionary sympathizers; the revolutionary underground invariably has such a widespread network, with such loyal participants, that the revolution has about as much trouble succeeding as a new MacDonald's franchise near a university.

Lisa Goldstein's *A Mask For The General* does it right. The underground doesn't have a master plan or an intricate network; mostly they're just young, poor, and disaffected. Far from being inept, the authorities press these people as hard as the general public will tolerate — for Goldstein recognizes the truth that dictatorships depend on the consent, open or tacet, of the majority of their citizens.

Mary has run away from a small town to live in the East Bay area of California, where she immediately falls in with legendary maskmaker Layla. This society's equivalent of punk is the wearing of masks in public. Layla's masks are especially chosen for each person who will wear one; she dreams of the person's true animal soul, and makes a mask accordingly. Mary at first wants to be her apprentice, but then is frightened by her visits to the dream world where animal souls are revealed. She rejects maskmaking and turns to more dangerous and direct revolution.

Layla, however, consults with the other maskmakers, who together form a kind of wizards' guild. But their magic is not the stuff of *Dungeons and Dragons.* Layla carefully makes a mask for the dictator, called the General, and delivers it to a police station, where she is arrested and the mask seized. But against all odds, the mask begins to make its way toward the general.

We are never told what will happen when the general puts it on. But Goldstein's novel so fully explores the difference between our mask — our public personna — and the truth of our soul, that we can easily guess. For Layla's masks are

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not masks at all; to put on her mask is really to take off the mask a person normally wears. The General's power depends on most Americans seeing *him* as a stern benefactor; once the jackal mask goes on his face, the complacent people will see him for what he really is, and he will become as doomed as Batista, Marcos, and Somoza were, their support vanishing until almost any wind could blow them away.

Goldstein's characters are real; you will care about them even when their frailties lead them to make mistakes. Her writing is vivid and clear. This novel does not have the largeness and energy of Romance — it's too individual for that. It is not a bolt of lightning. Instead, it's a candle in a long-dark place. It doesn't blind you; it enlightens.

The Last Film of Emile Vico, Thomas Gavin (Viking, cloth, 403 pp, $17.95)

This one isn't science fiction. It isn't fantasy. I shouldn't be reviewing it. It just happens to be a wonderful novel, and I want to tell you about it, because I know that there are some of you, at least, who care more about finding a wonderful story than about the genre label above the shelves at WaldenBooks.

The Last Film of Emile Vico is narrated by Farley, Vico's longtime friend and cameraman. Vico, a genius actor-director-screenwriter in the 1930s, has suddenly disappeared. The police suspect foul play — and they suspect Farley. The trouble is that Farley has, since childhood, shared his body with an unpredictable second personality he calls Spyhawk, and Farley has good reason to suspect that Spyhawk knows more about Vico's disappearance than he's telling. If Spyhawk is guilty of something, Farley obviously wants to be the first to know.

Living with Farley as narrator is an extraordinary experience. He sees the world with a cinematographer's eyes: the story doesn't stop for descriptions, it is built out of them, marvelous camera angles that have intricate and powerful meanings. There are echoes of the mood of tight madness in Robe-Grillet's *Jalousie*; you walk through stage sets and rainy streets in black and white, the light slanting like steel beams and pooling like oil on the ground.

Gavin is that rare creature, a literary writer who isn't trying to dazzle us with his prose. Instead, he tells a grand, passionate story using clear language that is true to the character, language that never calls attention to itself, that never pulls you out of the story, that never reminds you that there is an author

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playing puppeteer behind the black curtain. The result is that the story's illusion is perfectly created. If I have some minor quarrels with Gavin — like his decision to end the story without an uneqivocal confrontation between Farley and Vico — it doesn't change the fact that Gavin is an astonishingly good storyteller.

And for those of you who insist that there *must* be something science-fictional about your leisure reading, I'm delighted to inform you that few science fiction writers have created a world as real and yet as alien as the 1930s Hollywood of *The Last Film of Emile Vico.*

* * *

Polyphemus, Michael Shea (Arkham House Publishers, Sauk City, WI 52583; cloth, 245 pp, $16.95)

I hardly need to introduce you to the works of Michael Shea. Almost every story in this fine collection first appeared in the pages of F&SF. "Uncle Tuggs," "The Angels of Death," "The Autopsy," and, especially, "The Extra" (from last May's F&SF) are standouts. Published by Arkham House, with their normal care and quality, this collection is worth special-ordering.

Coming Soon

Next month: The feature story in the May issue is something special. It is a major SF novella by James Tiptree Jr., probably the last of its kind. We received it only a few months before her tragic death in May 1987.

The story, "The Color of Neanderthal Eyes," takes place on a planet called Wet, and it is about the compelling relationship between the lone survivor of an exploration team and the humanoid, aquatic natives. The story is filled with adventure, suspense and more, and you won't want to miss it. The May issue, with a beautiful James Gurney cover, is on sale March 31.

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This story, which is about bondage and freedom and a dying race on a dying world, is the first of several we have from one of the most interesting new writers we have seen in some time. Mr. Aldridge lives in Florida and writes that he has been a potter and stained glass designer for 15 years. "My wife Nancy is a psychologist, the ideal companion for an sf writer. I'm part Cherokee, and I grow wonderful tomatoes."

The Touch of the Hook

By Ray Aldridge

WERRIN ASH SAT in the airgate lounge, staring at nothing, waiting for Obsidian's ocean to freeze. On his left wrist the snake tightened.

He looked down. *It's almost pretty,* he thought. *How odd.* Black armored segments curved smoothly around his wrist. A ruby optic band and a cluster of silver sensor studs marked the snake's blunt head. Its tail circuitry plugged into a recess where an organic snake's gullet would be, and two heavy alloy fangs locked into deep sockets in the tail, forging an unbreakable manacle. Beside the optic band a tiny plate read: Property of SeedCorp.

Ash remembered the SeedCorp recruiter who had purchased his contract, three Standard years before.

The recruiter, an elegant morph from Dilvermoon, had spoken persuasively, in a guileless voice. "Citizen Ash, I judge you to be a careful man, and this is a job for a man who despises risk. SeedCorp will equip you with an advanced security link. It will be — I guarantee this — impossible for

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you to make a mistake in the performance of your duties."

Ash had pressed his thumb to the validation square, and the herman had smiled an ugly smile.

Ash reflected on the lovely irony of his bondage. He had always been cautious, afraid to act without the blessing of authority, afraid to make a fool of himself, afraid to commit an inappropriate act.

He would bear the bitter weight of the snake for seven more years. "Fool," he said, without passion.

He rose; stood looking from the outer airgate over the black sea. On the faraway horizon he could see another SeedCorp rig, its riding lights reduced by distance to a pallid glimmer.

A few dim stars emphasized the darkness of the moonless sky, and the sea was like an iron mirror. A long shudder ran through the rig, as it adjusted to the sea's tightening grip. The pressure of the water against the rig's insulating fields created a low gnawing sound, just at the threshold of audibility. Ash tried to ignore it, but the sound trembled along his bones.

It was three Standard weeks past sunset.

The snake stung him lightly. "Attention," it said. "A visitor approaches from the outer seagate."

"Now?" Ordinarily, the outside Dags went deep into the reefs before the freeze.

The snake made no reply. Ash went quickly down the spiral of steps to the seagate lounge. At the outer seagate membrane, he looked down. A swimmer moved through the dark water along the top of the black reefs.

The Dag approached the seagate, a slender, legless creature with a muscular fluked tail and two almost-human arms, its skin a dense matte black encrusted with patches of white snowflake limpets. Its head was a smooth ovid, featureless except for the palps wrapped across the face, and the gleam of deep-set eyes.

Ash activated the lexitran.

The Dag floated upright on the other side of the gate. It uttered a low-frequency chime. The lexitran took a moment to process the Dag's statement; then, in a neutral tone, translated, "I speak of important matters, Keeper. Do you know me?"

The Dag swam close to the membrane. Its palps opened briefly in the brightness of the seagate lights, exposing rich color, violet and wine on

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soft gray. He recognized the markings of the Dag overseer's mate. She had no nose, and her mouth as a circular maw ringed with three rows of sharp, inward-hooking teeth. For a moment her pale yellow eyes seemed remarkably human, comprehensible, filled with some deep sorrow.

"I know you," he said.

The face closed. "Do you know my mate?"

"Yes."

"I come to plead for his life."

The snake spoke. "What threatens your mate?"

The Dag overseer's mate shifted her palps to look down at the snake. "Do I address the Keeper, or the Will he carries?"

The snake flexed against his wrist, the segments moving with a small rasping sound. "What matter?"

Ash attempted to regain control. "To return to the important matter. . . ."

"The freeze approaches." The Dag overseer's mate paused. "How many of your crew have died this night?"

Ash was taken aback and had no ready response. The snake spoke for him again. "The work is dangerous; SeedCorp makes no secret of that. Your mate is well paid."

"How many?" she persisted.

"Four, since sunset, accidents," Ash said. "What has this to do with your mate? He is capable."

The palps opened slightly, under the stress of emotion. "Yes, he is stronger than most, but he carries heavier burdens. When the ice comes, I will go to the dreams fearing his death." The palps opened further, trembling, and Ash saw her naked face again. "He has not dreamed in four nights! Please, let him out of the Warmth. Give him to the ice for a night; surely you can spare him that long."

The snake twitched again. "Impossible," it said. "Now is Our heaviest harvest cycle. His skills are indispensible."

"He must dream!" Even the neutral voice of the lexitran contained a trace of passionate emphasis. "Don't think we are not grateful. Without the food SeedCorp pays, we are a dying race on a dying world. We all know this. But he *must* dream. Please! Or sometime soon he will choose to die, like the others."

"No suicides have occurred, to Our knowledge." The snake spoke in

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didactic tones. Ash no longer attempted to interrupt.

"It is not like that. You cannot understand." Her face was fully exposed, the eyes bulging with urgency, the mouth spasming.

At that moment the freeze caught her. Ash looked into her frantic eyes for a long moment, until the ice clouded with stress fractures and the membrane of the seagate turned an opaque pearly gray.

Later, Ash looked down into the rig's protected lagoon. Here and there, dim red lights burned through the dark water. The mature cryptopods moved through the artificial reefs in flashing shoals, mirrored bodies throwing crimson glints against the black insulator fields that held out Obsidian's ice.

The snake stung him sharply. "Be alert: something comes across the ice," it said.

He went to the outer airgate and saw the ice crawler, approaching rapidly over the fresh ice. Green and violet running lights glowed above the crawler's cab. It came under the rig's lights, a very old crawler, poorly maintained, its naked-alloy chassis marked with weeping lines of corrosion. At every pressure ridge it jounced violently and emitted a small cloud of steam.

"Another one, there to the north," the snake said. A second set of lights closed swiftly.

The first crawler plunged to a halt in a spray of ice, to sit rocking on spiked rollers. A moment later the dorsal hatch popped, and the Green peddler emerged, its stocky, six-limbed body encased in a battered exosuit. The peddler climbed nimbly to the ice and turned to face the approaching vehicle.

The Green waved its upper arms violently, made shooing gestures, finally drew a graser and fired a beam across the other crawler's nose. The other crawler slewed around, made off to the west, and the peddler holstered the weapon with an air of satisfaction. It reboarded, and a moment later the crawler churned off along the rig's perimeter. Ash watched it until it disappeared around the curve of the sponson wall.

The snake shifted on his wrist. "You have duties," it said. "And then We will check on the peddler. Strange, that little drama — possibly irregular. We understood that the peddlers divide their territories most exactingly. But now, to work."

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"Yes." Ash shook himself. He looked out over the ice one more time. Colloidal colony plants ordinarily kept Obsidian's ocean fluid, despite the terrible cold. Now they used the heat released by the freeze to raise their sporing bodies above the ice. Spiky threads covered the ice with a quivering furry black carpet. The reproductive cycle of these plants accounted for the unnatural swiftness of the freeze.

The deaths that had occurred since Obsidian's long night had begun; were they truly suicides, as the Dag overseer's mate believed? Two of the workers had died perforated by cryptopod swarms. One was found drifting dead under the reefs, with no mark on his body. And one had apparently been carried out of the water by a surge of the insulating fields and died slowly and painfully of gill-burn. Accidents, he had supposed.

"*Now*, Ash," the snake said, and stung him. Fire poured into his arm. He gasped and bit his lip. The smaller pain helped him to endure the larger, until he could get his breath back.

He felt a shuddering vibration at his wrist — the snake preparing to punish him again. He went hastily down to the inner seagate and climbed into his exosuit. As he sealed the faceplate, the vibration faded. He clipped a graser to his free wrist and tipped through the gate into the frigid lagoon.

An implanted fiber carried the snake's voice up his arm to a bone mike behind his ear. "First the generators."

Boot jets drove Ash slowly through the black water. The generators that maintained the fields and kept back the ice ran smoothly. In the hatcheries, millions of larval cryptopods fed on extruded columns of tank-cultured flesh.

He moved down into the artificial reefs, where the larval cryptopods metamorphosed into the precious adult form. Twenty meters ahead the dull red flare of a submerged beacon illuminated the Dag overseer and his gang. A dozen Dags worked at a section of used-up reef, removing bolts, lowering the raddled black slabs to a transport pallet. The big overseer floated above the gang, marking off a waterproof checklist.

Ash coasted to a stop. He activated his external speaker, spoke greetings.

The Dag overseer turned to him and opened his palps briefly. A chime vibrated through the water; the lexitran relayed the meaning. "Keeper. You are well?"

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"Yes. The freeze has come."

"I felt it," the Dag overseer said. "I felt it."

"The work goes well?"

"Yes, well." The Dag overseer turned back to his work, as if to avoid further conversation. The overseer had once been friendlier, had questioned Ash about the faraway pangalac worlds and their teeming peoples. But in the past few Standard months, he had retreated into a curt reserve.

"Your mate came to the outer seagate," Ash said.

The overseer whirled in the water and opened his face. Ash looked into eyes burning with some harsh, unclassifiable emotion.

"She was concerned for you. She implied that you were under some sort of strain, but before she could elaborate, the freeze caught her. Will she be safe?"

The overseer's facial palps closed tightly. He looked away. "She will be safe. No harm comes to those who dream in the ice."

"And you? What did she mean? She also mentioned dreams."

The overseer shuddered. "I cannot say."

The snake stirred at Ash's wrist. "We waste time," it said. The peddler; that is now the most pressing business."

Ash replied on the private channel. "Wait. This is important." In the darkness and cold of the lagoon, Ash retained a measure of autonomy. Should the snake sting him into unconsciousness, Ash would sink to the bottom of the sump. There he would be torn apart by the circulation rotors, leaving the snake without a servant. A tiny advantage, a pathetic advantage, but it was all he had, and he pushed it as much as he dared. The snake waited.

"You really don't know why she was concerned?"

The overseer swung back, pushing close to Ash. The alien eyes glittered between clenched palps. "Do you complain of my work? Have I given cause for dissatisfaction?"

Ash drew back, feeling a touch of fear. "No, no . . . ," he said.

Ash reached the robotic processing plant, where cryptopods were distilled into valuable pharmaceutical essences.

When he stood in the air of the plant, water freezing on his exosuit, the snake spoke. "To the parking bay."

In the parking bay, Ash approached the peddler's ice crawler, graser

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held ready. He knocked gingerly at the battered alloy of the lock. It popped open, to reveal the Green, still wearing its exosuit. "Welcome you are," said the peddler, in musical Standard patois.

"In," said the snake on the private channel. "Caution, Ash, caution."

The peddler's name was Avlsum. While the snake examined the peddler's papers, the Green offered Ash a hot drink in a blue glass bubble, one of the pungent narcotic teas favored by the Greens.

"Not just now," Ash said.

The peddler shrugged, a complicated serpentine motion of four arms and two sets of shoulders. "As you will. I myself chilled am." It sipped tea through a silver straw.

Finally, the snake spoke. "Tell Us what you intend to trade."

Avlsum's broad, flat face, wrinkled as a green prune, displayed a careful humility. "Since you ask, this my merchandise is." The peddler pointed to a cluttered shelf, where a small cube of silvery alloy and blue plastic sat. Telltales glowed green at one corner; lying atop the device was an induction harness, set to the dimensions of a Dag skull. "Naught to hide I have."

"Its function?" the snake demanded.

"A simple and harmless one, a *human* device it is."

"Explain without further evasion."

The Green shuffled to the device, opened a small panel, and removed a tray of microwafers. "A teaching device it is; these the lessons are." He selected one wafer at random, held it delicately between corrugated fingers. "Feelings it teaches. 'Emotional states of being,' it says." Avlsum held the wafer closer, squinted. "Here. This one, 'The Pleasure Felt by the Righteous Torturer' is."

"What purpose could that serve?" The snake spoke with disinterested contempt.

Once again, Ash had become a spectator. He felt a hot flush of rage, too hot for caution. "A *human* device, it claims. Perhaps *I* might understand." He held the snake at eye level, hand clenched. "Presumably, SeedCorp sent me here for some reason. A robot carcass would have served to carry you about." He had forgotten the Green peddler; the world had narrowed to the ruby eye of the snake.

The snake spoke calmly. "What do you call the device, peddler?"

"A 'Lorendiazzo Emotigogue' it labeled is."

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Ash felt the weight of the snake's full attention. "Yes, there is a purpose to your presence here, and yes, We lack the human perspective. These two facts are not unrelated. Since you wish to demonstrate your usefulness to SeedCorp, you may test this 'Emotigogue.'"

Ash lowered his hand, shaking.

Ash lay on the hard shelf as the Green adjusted the induction harness snugly around his head. The cermet plates were warm where they touched his temples.

"Here nothing to fear is. All perfectly safe is."

Ash said nothing. The snake quivered at his wrist; Ash wondered if he heard the snake's laughter.

"Ready you are?"

"We are ready," the snake said.

Ash slid away from himself.

He sat in a deep wing chair, beside a blazing fireplace. He moved and felt the pain of deep injuries; his torso seemed filled with jagged glass. The pain shocked away thought for a moment, and then he was no longer Werrin Ash.

The man he hated sat across the white rug, helpless, bound to a heavy chair with strong rope. The man looked like the monster he was, with a hairless, misshapen skull; a broad, flat face; tiny eyes deep-set behind knobs of fatty muscle. The thick, scarred mouth curved in a contemptuous smile.

He took a painful breath and spoke to the man he hated. "You've hurt me badly. But I will live, and you must die. Before I kill you, tell me where you have hidden my child."

"Perhaps she is dead," the man said in a smooth, resonant voice, the voice of a cultured man, a man in control.

"Is she?" He felt his heart stop.

The man laughed. "No. Though I've crushed many a prettier flower."

He closed his eyes for a moment. "Where is she?"

"She's welded into an escape module. The module is hidden in a cave on Darkside. There is air and water and heat, but no food. No light. She's been there for six days now, so she'll live for a few weeks more. You'll never find her." The man sat straighter in his bonds. "Release me. I'll take you to her."

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He looked at the man. "I cannot trust you," he said sadly. His gaze strayed to the fireplace, where a poker lay in the coals, glowing cherry red. The man followed the direction of his glance, and fear appeared on the brutal face for the first time.

It seemed to go on forever, the fierce, shameful joy. Finally, Ash returned to himself, nostrils still distended with the stink of burning flesh. The Green peddler stared down into his eyes, wearing an almost-human expression of concern.

"Agree with you it did? Perhaps another better would serve?" The thick fingers fumbled another wafer from the tray. "Here. 'The Touch of the Hook' this is." Avlsum held it out, and Ash snatched off the harness, shuddering.

"Will you give Us the benefit of your human perspective now?" the snake asked.

"It seems harmless," Ash said thickly. "Though I cannot imagine why a Dag would wish to experience human emotion. At least *those* human emotions."

The snake considered. "How," it asked the Green, "do the Dags pay? If you trade for cryptopods or cryptopod essences, We must expunge you."

Avlsum's wrinkled face displayed injured dignity. "No, no. With their own experiences they pay. As your slave has paid. For a memory, a memory. Each being at least one worthwhile memory has. A collector I am."

"Then collect freely. Come, Ash. You have more important duties." As Ash turned to go, the snake spoke on the private channel. "What did the peddler take from you, We wonder?"

Two Standard days passed. The snake seemed uneasy. The slow Obsidian night moved a little closer to dawn. Outside, the sporing bodies spurted white dust into the still air, then collapsed to the ice. Ash began to imagine that the workers were watching him with hostile eyes. The Dag overseer no longer observed even the bare forms of Dag civility.

Several times he saw the big Dag moving toward the load-in area, where the Green peddler had set up its device. A steady stream of off-shift workers passed in and out, and Ash wondered what experiences they bartered.

Ash was standing by the outer airgate, looking to the north, when the mutiny began. A red light bloomed suddenly on the horizon, then another.

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Ash was standing by the outer airgate when the mutiny began.

The snake contracted, squeezing the bones of his wrist painfully. Ash jerked, afraid. For a long moment the snake was silent; then a roar filled Ash's head.

"Betrayal!" it raged. "The rigs are sabotaged, all the beautiful rigs. The Green is an emancipator, a filthy, skulking slave-lover; We see it now. To the lagoon, before it is too late!"

But as Ash snapped the last closure of his exosuit, a thudding explosion shuddered through the rig. The snake's voice grew too large to bear. Ash staggered and nearly fell. The snake stung him ferociously, and he seized a graser and plunged through the seagate, arm on fire.

The snake made an effort to moderate its voice. "The fields hold. It may not be too late yet. Hurry, hurry."

Ash was terrified, but he jetted swiftly through the black water toward the insulating-field generators. He saw no workers; they would be hiding in the reefs, awaiting the outcome. He tried not to imagine what would happen should the damaged generators fail while he was in the water. He could not estivate in the ice, like the Dags. The ice would crush his soft human body, a slow, inexorable squeeze.

As he approached the damaged sector, a sputtering pink glare became visible, where the generators bled power into the water. Ash saw a massive shape outlined against the light; the Dag overseer blocked the ladder that led to the generator pod.

Then he saw the sharp pry hook the Dag held, and he drifted to a stop, bringing up the graser.

"Kill him," the snake ordered, and fed a jolt of pain into his arm.

"Wait," Ash gasped. "We should find out why. . . ." He still remembered the female's beseeching eyes.

"Kill, We said!" The pain increased, and Ash shuddered.

The Dag overseer pulsed a chime. After a moment, Ash remembered to activate the lexitran, and the Dag spoke again. "Go away, Keeper. I do not want to harm you, though if you get too close, I will cut the Will from your arm."

The snake hurt Ash so badly that he blacked out. But he woke almost

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immediately, before he could drift down toward the sump. "Why will you not obey?" the snake asked.

When Ash could speak again, he asked the Dag, "Why have you done this?"

The Dag seemed to expand, and his palps opened to reveal his colors, smoky crimson on dark metallic green. "A friend gave us dreams; not so fine as the ice dreams, perhaps, but still good."

The snake made an inarticulate sound of rage, and a thin magenta beam from the snake's head struck through the water to find the Dag's brain. Steam boiled along the track of the beam. Bubbles rose glittering to the surface. The Dag floated limp, a great hole burned through his face.

"See?" the snake screamed. "See what you have forced Us to? We are not designed to use so much energy; you have made Us weak. But We can still punish you; We can still make you long for death. Up, up, to the generators."

Ash climbed the ladder, emerged dripping from the black water, to find the Green peddler standing on the sponson, holding a very large graser.

"Destroyer!" the snake shrilled. "Kill it! Quickly, there is still time."

"I cannot," Ash sobbed. "It will kill me first."

The hum of the generators changed pitch subtly, and the lights flickered. "No time, no time," the snake said, and seemed to fall into a muttering dialogue with itself. Ash slumped against the sponson wall, looking at the Green.

Ash whispered, "Who are you?"

"A free-lance emancipator I am. By the Society to Conserve Sentient Diversity, I contracted am. The Dags. . . . Of the ice dreams they deprived were. Live so, they cannot. Like humans, of sleep deprived . . . they die." The peddler waved one hand at the twisted metal of the generator pod. "An incompetent demolitionist I am. But patience I have."

The snake's voice was suddenly loud in Ash's head. "Kill it! Kill it now," the snake raged. The pain rolled up his arm, a pain that seemed to split open the fibers of his flesh.

The Green looked at him with shadowed eyes, the wrinkled face impassive, the huge graser never wavering from the center of Ash's chest.

"Spare you I would," Avlsum said. "But treacherous the snake is. Trust you I cannot. Sorry I am." The Green's thick finger tightened on the trigger.

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Ash did not raise the graser, despite the screams of the snake. It no longer spoke in words. Skull-shattering bursts of static filled Ash. He dropped the graser, and it bounced to the edge of the sponson.

He fell to his knees, blind with pain and the terrible roaring in his head. He collapsed, almost rolled into the black water, and for a moment the snake released him. He caught himself, pushed away from the edge. The generators paused, began again, then ceased completely, and the lights dropped to the dull amber emergency level.

The water in the lagoon touched the ice outside.

With his last strength, Ash thrust the snake down into the water. The water closed sluggishly over the snake and became ice in the next instant.

He looked up. The Green squatted on the sponson, graser still carefully aimed. Avlsum's wide mouth twitched with sad amusement. "There only one way is," Avlsum said kindly. "Transportation to the Belt City I will give. If you can." Avlsum slid the graser within Ash's reach, then steadied its own weapon with all four hands.

The snake poured out pain, twisting Ash into a knot of agony. "What have you done?" it shrieked, and its voice filled the world. Ash's body flopped and jerked; he felt bones in his arm break where the ice held him. The ice bulged and fumed; a red light flickered as the snake tired to melt its way out.

He reached out and took the graser; it was as if his free arm had no connection to the rest of his body, as if had a mind of its own. When Ash depressed his firing stud and swept the beam across the ice, shearing through his forearm, he was surprised as the snake must have been.

Silence rang in his head. Blood burst from the incompletely cauterized arteries, splashing across the hard black ice, freezing instantly into lovely red crystals. He tipped forward, and the ice was soft and warm.

Just before the darkness took him, he felt the Green lift him gently.

Ash woke in Avlsum's crawler, swaying in an improvised hammock. The air was heavy with the musty body odor of the Green, and the sharp, oily stench of Green spices. He pulled the thick, warm stuff gratefully into his lungs. After a while he raised his arm and looked at the neatly bandaged stump. The sight brought him a pleasurable pang, more sweet than bitter. He smiled.

"Awake you are? Good!" The Green turned to look back at him. Avlsum

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sat in the pilot chair, driving with one hand, holding a small vidbook in one hand, stirring a steaming pot with another hand. "Dinner soon is."

Ash ate awkwardly, holding the pot between his knees, steadying it with the stump, but he ate with a good appetite. The Green's stew tasted better than it smelled, fortunately.

Avlsum cut the throttle, and the crawler coasted to a stop. "Listen," Avlsum said, rising from the pilot chair. "Somewhere a fine human cyberarm I have. In the lockers I will look."

The Green disappeared back into the cargo bay, and Ash heard rattles and thumps, an occasional crash, muttered Green curses. But finally, Avlsum returned with the cyberarm. It was lovely, a god's arm, of golden alloy, with a circlet of smoldering green gems at the wrist.

"From a pirate it came. A very evil man," Avlsum said, holding it out. "But beautiful work it is."

Ash drew away slightly. "It's too fine for me. You've already done too much for me."

"No, no. Take. Self-grafting it is. Look." And Avlsum displayed the butt end of the arm, where a ring of tiny stainless teeth protruded. "One problem there is. No human anesthetic aboard is. Trimmed your stump must be. Or one arm longer than the other will be."

Ash set his jaw, held out the stump. "All right."

Avlsum laughed. "Brave you are. But here a solution is." The Green pointed to the emotigogue. "No pain, when connected you are."

When Avlsum strapped him to a chair with strong webbing, Ash felt a momentary flash of panic. But, he told himself, the Green had already had plenty of opportunity to harm him. He lay back, and the harness tightened around his head.

Avlsum held up a wafer. "Here. This 'The Touch of the Hook' is."

Ash struggled against the bonds. "No, wait . . . ," he said, as Avlsum slipped the wafer into the slot.

And then he floated in the eddy below the cascade. The cool, sweet water caressed his sleek body, and he pumped the rich stuff through his gills, glorying in it. He sensed movement along the bank, and for a moment he became more alert. But no shadows fell across the sun-dappled surface, and he relaxed. He sank to the bottom, finning over the gravel, probing for tasty larvae.

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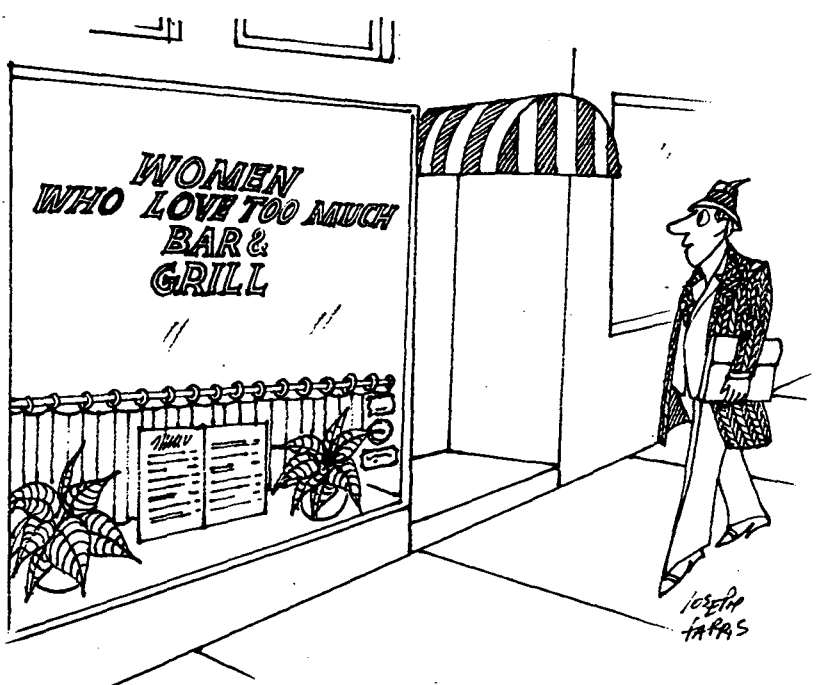
When the mayfly drifted down the current toward him, he rose to it without hesitation. He sucked it in, expecting the crunchy tang of the spent insect. But instead, his mouth filled with a stale, metallic, artificial taste, and he tried to spit it out. A sharp pain drove into his jaw and jerked his head violently toward the bank.

Panic filled him. The pain was terrible, but the constraint was worse. The moment seemed to last forever; he was drawn inexorably toward the bank. He angled down, then up, finally leaping high into the harsh air, shaking his head, seeing some great uncouth land monster on the bank.

At that instant the hook tore loose from the soft tissues of his mouth, and he fell back into the water, free.

Fear still drove him as he fled away down the riffle, but over the fear, building higher and higher, was a great joy, all the more intense for its unfamiliarity.



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Alan Dean Foster and Sally McBride offer a compelling new story about a painter on the brink of failure and despair, when something strange washes up on the beach near her home and changes her life . . .

Dance on a Forgotten Shore

By Alan Dean Foster and Sally McBride

SOMETHING ROCKING gently in the mist, out on a somber sea. Not a whale. Too irregular in shape. Not a boat. Too close in even for a sailboat. Sylvie squinted at it through the kitchen window, moving a tray of leggy seedlings out of the way for a better view. Whatever it was, she wasn't imagining it. A greenish light came from it, diffused by the silent music. Then her gaze dropped slightly. There was another point of light, closer in.

Which meant there was someone on the beach, too. Damn! She wiped sweat and dirt from her eyes with the back of one hand. *Enough of this misery, woman. You've got a visitor.* Unintentional, of course. The only kind that came.

Evening had progressed to the stage where colors assumed a preternatural intensity. Purples and reds lay so heavy on bushes and rocks you

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could taste them. Green licked through the fog from tree to tree, and gray was queen. Within half an hour, darkness would overtake all equally. Whoever was down there would be spending the night in her cove. She wrestled with herself, knowing the outcome of the mental contest before it began. Might as well go on down and introduce herself, or soon there'd come a forlorn knock on her door, followed by an apologetic half smile from some helpless soul asking to use the phone she didn't have.

The greenish glow bobbed and dipped, flickering through the cedar boughs that partially screened the beach. The fool was probably trying to determine whether the tide was ebbing or flooding. Sylvie's lips tightened. If she'd wanted streams of ignorant tourists trespassing on her beach, she'd have taken a place in town instead of this run-down cabin at the edge of nowhere.

She pulled with practiced strength at the pump over the sink. A gush of cold water from the rock cistern rinsed her hands of soapsuds. She started for the door, then hesitated and picked up the ax that stood next to the wood box. The weight of her fist gave her confidence. It could be someone besides a lost tourist, someone out for trouble. It would be better to take along something besides old Jewel for protection.

Sylvie stamped twice, hard, on the plank floor. Not needing to wait for a response, she headed out the back door. It led to the steps she'd hacked out of the cliff that fell fifteen feet to the beach below. She didn't add a whistle, or call Jewel's name. The dog was deaf. Always had been for all Sylvie knew of the sort of life the animal had led before she'd taken her in three years ago. It was impossible to tell if Jewelie had ever been able to hear.

What she did respond to was vibration. A thump on the floor, the deep booming of winter waves on the rocks, thunder rolling through the forest: all elicited different reactions from the dog. She was an expert at facial expression and human body language, waiting alertly as any hearing animal for commands in the private sign language the two of them had worked out over the years.

So there was no need to wait or look around. Sylvie knew Jewel would be right behind her.

Sure enough, a moment later the big dog butted her muzzle into Sylvie's hand, then bounded off into the woods only to quickly circle back, tail held flag-high, grinning in her special way at the unexpected evening

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romp. Sylvie dug her fingers into the dog's thick golden ruff and signed for her to heel. Jewel obeyed instantly. Gripping the ax tightly in her other hand, Sylvie headed into the rapidly darkening tangle of cedar, fir, and arbutus that formed a wall between her cabin and the mist-shrouded sand below.

When she had first come to the island, almost five years ago now, the forest had frightened her a little. It was an excited, hopeful kind of fear she'd felt as the bus had bounced along the rutted gravel road that meandered eight kilometers to her little two-room cabin. The summer sun had baked the road white, enhancing the contrast with the bright green of the forest. At art college, Sylvie had learned that the human eye could distinguish more than 10 million distinct tints and hues of color. Surely there were at least a million greens visible through the bus's dusty window, from the translucent peridot of new huckleberry leaves to the almost-black of dignified old firs. Each leaf and branch seemed to mask the one behind, the greens and browns growing deeper and richer as they faded farther into the woods until, at the farthest limits of vision, ghost trees seemed to pale into true insubstantiality.

It was a beautiful island. That first idyllic summer, full of purpose and discovery, was the best of Sylvie's life. Though winter came in its time, she welcomed the changes of seasons. Even the rain, the dark and sometimes dismal days, the constant chopping and hauling of wood to feed the stove, brought new insight and surprise into her life. Her toes were always cold. But she found a sense of security in her tiny home, in the glow from the kerosene lamps. Even during her first really bad winter storm, all alone through the wild night, she felt nothing could harm her. She brewed hot chocolate, turned the lamps down low, and curled up by her big studio window to watch the breakers through the whipping branches as they smashed into the beach. Above the cabin a huge Douglas fir danced wildly like some demented, ragged sentry, doing battle with the storm. Torn loose by the wind, a big branch tumbled down to strike the window with a soft, wet slap. Sylvie gasped in surprise and watched the green needle-bristled thing settle to the ground like a dying animal. The wind blew the needles back like fur, revealing silvery undersides.

Sylvie knew the big tree wouldn't come down. Others hadn't been so fortunate. Prowling the beach beneath an ice-blue sky the following day, she saw that massive driftwood logs that had lain placidly immobile all

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summer had been tossed and splintered indifferently by towering waves. Wind-snapped branches littered the ground and paths around her cabin, but Sylvie had faith. The big fir would not topple and crush her tiny home. It was strong, flexible, and somehow wise in the way of storms. It had stood in that spot for a long time, far longer than the house beneath it, learning how to deal with winter. Not a bad philosophy to adopt herself, she thought.

She also vowed to find the money, somewhere, for a chain saw. The beach was thick with fresh logs ripped from logging booms somewhere out in the straits. From the wood strewn along twenty yards of shore, she could supply herself with fuel for a year. The big ax was soul-satisfying but not very efficient.

Eventually she'd gotten the chain saw, thanks to doting parents eager to commission portraits of their children and pets. Over the years the beach had served her well.

Only — she was sick to death of painting portraits.

"I want him to look just like he is in this photo, only can you make his eyes, you know, bluer or something?" Fatuousness engraved in her memory by repetition. Always she smiled and took the money. What was she, after all her work and study? An artist, or a servant to others' vanity? Two years of art school had taught her composition and shading, line and oil. It had taught her nothing of life, done nothing to prepare her for the realities of struggle and indifference.

Twenty-year-old Sylvia Rudd had gone forth to the rocky, rugged coast of British Columbia to make her name as a painter. In the gulf islands of the province's southern coast, she discovered what she felt was the perfect place for inspiration — lush, wave-battered, secluded. Divine food for the spirit of a girl who longed to express her vision of the land and sea in paint.

That wasn't how it had worked out.

Something had gone wrong. Somewhere between the mind's conception of beauty and the hand's choice of pigment and brushstroke, the vision went awry.

Oh, her stuff was O.K. She even sold a couple of pieces a year, from the arts-and-crafts store in the little town that huddled around the government dock like a cub reluctant to be parted from their mother. There tourists would disembark from their big Chris-Crafts, or from the ferry that

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docked at Galiano Island twice a day. Along with fingering the hand-dyed scarves, the pottery, and the carved wooden wind chimes, they'd glance at her paintings and say how pretty they were. Pretty. Not inspired, not magnificent, not thought-provoking. Just — pretty. Seashores, flower-strewn mountainsides, totem-pole studies: everybody did them. Hers were just as good as everybody else's. And no better.

She'd been so sure all she needed was the right place, the peace and serenity of the forest. To ensure the purity of her insight, she deliberately scorned any modern accoutrements. Instead of electricity, she relied on her cast-iron stove for heat and cooking. Water came from the stream-fed cistern and was heated in a huge enamel pot on the stove. An outhouse served its purpose adequately.

She'd even refused a phone lest it interfere with her vision, finally installing one only at her parents' insistence. Whereupon her mother began phoning her every week, suggesting (in the kind, insinuating voice of someone who had only her best interests in mind) that she should give up this foolishness and come home. There was always a place for her, once she got this absurd notion out of her system.

As always, Sylvie would refuse. At which point the voice would turn harsh. "All that money! For college, for lessons — and for what? So you could traipse off and live like a hippie on some godforsaken island in the middle of the Pacific? I'm your mother! Listen to me, you little . . . !"

Sylvie had the shiny new phone taken out after two months of this, trusting in her parents' essential lack of interest to keep them from making the bus trip from the interior to see her. She was right. They sent long letters instead, which she ignored. Every so often there would be a small, grudging check. Against her better judgment, she'd even tried to cash one once. It bounced.

All the money she had received from her Great-Aunt Mabel's modest estate had been spent on tuition and purchasing the cabin, much to her parsimonious parents' disgust. They'd never understood her relationship with Mable anyway, that elegant relic of a grander day Sylvie had helped convoy to a nursing home. Mable had neither husband nor children, but, to everyone's surprise, she had still accumulated a small sum of money to bestow, rain money hoarded carefully during years of stringent living. This she had left to Sylvie, sensing in her soft-spoken niece a yearning for something besides the path ordained by her mother: marriage, chil-

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dren, obedience to a dull, safe husband.

One day closer to the end than anyone knew, the old woman had sputtered a few acerbic comments on doing what one must rather than what one ought. Then she'd pressed the unexpected check into Sylvie's palm.

"Cash it fast, girl, or it'll get tied up in legalese, and those parents of yours will squabble over it for years!"

All right. She didn't have much. But the cabin didn't take much to run. A seasonal job in an ice cream parlor in town helped, but winters were hard.

Two years after moving to the island, she found Jewel. The dog had been left behind, abandoned by some indifferent summer visitor. In some ways, things became a little harder because Jewel had to eat, too. But the dog's company far outweighed the increased struggle.

At first she hadn't understood what was wrong with the big, skinny retriever, and assumed she was moping for her heartless master in the loyal, foolish way of a dog. Only later did she realize the dog was profoundly deaf. She accepted the handicap without complaint.

"Seems fair," she said into Jewel's face as they sat together on the steps overlooking the water. "You're not much of a dog, and I'm not much of a painter."

Passing months found Sylvie slipping more and more into a state of chronic depression. Smiles were hard to produce, so she avoided people to keep from having to fake them. Having nothing to say, she kept to herself, talking only to Jewel in an affectionate singsong she knew the dog couldn't hear.

She also found that she painted less and less, spending time instead puttering aimlessly in her vegetable garden or strolling along the beach. What she did paint when she could muster the resolve was facile. Derivative stuff in a mishmash of styles calculated to please a public that didn't care anyway. It was work that had nothing to do with what simmered in her head and heart.

Five years of long winters and disappointing summers. Five years of struggle and heartbreak. Five years before she finally came to understand that she just didn't have what it took. She would sit for hours poking morosely at the dying embers in the fireplace, wondering what the difference was between the ordinary and the unique, the plain and the brilliant.

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In a human face the placement of the eyes, the width of a brow, or the texture of skin could mean ugliness or beauty. In a painting it was the choice of color, the length of a brushstroke, or the proportion of light to shade that determined if a work earned a sobriquet masterpiece or ordinary.

Try as she might, Sylvie couldn't seem to break through the barrier of mediocrity. More than once she gave up and wept in frustration at the fading vision of beauty that called out to her yet remained tantalizingly out of reach. She could imagine — why couldn't she execute? Weeks, months would slip away while she guiltily ignored the easel and oils that caused her so much pain. Instead of working, she read and cultivated her vegetable garden. She walked the forest with Jewel. It didn't matter what she did. The days were all the same.

Someone blundering onto her beach was the most excitement she'd had in weeks. With a mixture of anticipation and uncertainty, she picked her way through the dusk beneath the cedars and arbutus that overhung the path to the shore. Carefully, she descended the series of flat stepping-stones, letting go of Jewel's ruff to balance herself against the nearby trees. Deciduous evergreens, the arbutus shed their slippery leaves constantly. They formed a treacherous dun-colored carpet underfoot.

Near the bottom she found herself pausing. Something was making the skin on her back prickle. Small thoughts carried with them small fears.

A maple's platter-sized leaves formed a damp, heavy screen on the west side of the path. She hugged the trunk for balance and peered apprehensively through the verdure. Only a few meters to the beach now. Out in the mist the emerald light that had first attracted her attention still bobbed and fell, having seemingly grown no nearer.

Oddly, Jewel didn't seem interested. The dog had trotted off into the woods to sniff idly at a rotting, moss-covered log. Drizzle clung to Sylvie's hair and beaded her eyelashes. She took the last steps down and blinked the rain from her eyes as she stepped out onto the sand.

Shock then, cessation of breathing, momentary paralysis as her eyes cleared. Not a lost tourist, oh no. With a great effort, she managed to swallow, staring, frozen to the sand.

Silvery, like quicksilver formed almost into a man-shape, it flexed and swayed not ten meters from where Sylvie stood. She wanted to run, back up the steps, and slam behind her the door of the safe little house. She wanted to wake up.

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She did neither. Instead, she tore her eyes from the apparition on the beach and focused desperately on the craft that floated unnaturally high on the water and did not rise or fall with the waves. The swells parted docilely around it on their course toward the shore, leaving it untouched, unmoved as an outcropping of granite. It was boat-shaped, dull gray and smooth in outline, but it was not a boat. It seemed to combine tremendous mass with extraordinary lightness, a platinum insubstantiality, an illusion that looked solid as a breakwater. Her green glow was a random pattern of lights that flowed like liquid emeralds along the craft's prow, faded, and brightened anew.

An alien craft. An alien creature, large as life, here, on her beach.

A phantom, a dream, anything but real. Frantically, she looked around for Jewel. There she was, unconcernedly poking around on some dog quest of her own, her fur silvered with droplets brushed off the salal and salmonberry bushes. Deaf the dog might be, but she wasn't blind, and her sense of smell functioned perfectly, as Sylvie knew from the last time someone had invaded her property.

So why didn't the retriever go tearing across the beach, bristling with fury at the intruder? Was there really nothing there?

Sylvie leaned out past the last trunk and leaves. As if in response, the shape turned toward her. Immediately she dropped into a crouch, gasping and near petrified with fear. Suddenly Jewel was there, reacting to her mistress's fear scent. Puzzled, she whined and put her wet paws on Sylvie's knees as she licked her face.

After a heart-thudding minute, Sylvie gathered all the courage she possessed and raised her head to look again. It was looking back, straight at her. Its luminous alien eyes held a message for her.

And suddenly she wasn't afraid anymore.

Shyly, she stepped away from the maple and moved out onto the sand. Her artist's mind recorded every detail as she advanced. He was tall (she knew it was a he, though how she knew, she could not have told), bright as the gleam of water on a spiderweb. Metallic in hue, yet suppler then human flesh could ever be. Dozens of delicate tendrils trailed from his upper body, lit to transparency by some inner illumination. His head was narrow, held proudly high. A thin, bony blade ran in a polished crest down to a birdlike beak that manifested, quite incredibly, an expression Sylvie thought she could comprehend. It was amusement.

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Breaking the optic link, the creature bent and began to examine the beach pebbles, picking first one, then another, seemingly at random. It occurred to Sylvie that he was consciously soothing her in an attempt to make contact.

She forgot every anatomy lesson she'd ever taken, in a vain attempt to sort out the musculature that formed those long, tapering legs. They and much of the upper body were encased in a pebbly golden garment that looked like poured silk. As he straightened anew, the waving tendrils parted to reveal something like a golden bandolier supporting multiple pouches slung across one — shoulder? She wondered what the pouches contained. Pieces of Earth? Rocks and shells? The kinds of things everyone picked up at the beach, little memories made solid.

At ease without awareness of having been eased, Sylvie stood relaxed and expectant before him. She thought she knew now why she was thinking of the creature, so unimaginably alien, as "he." Embodied in his lithe and vigorous pose was the essence of every masculine explorer, every adventurer who'd ever sailed the unknown seas of Earth or scaled a mountain because it was there. How far, she wondered, had he come on his journey?

A cold, wet muzzle thrust into her hand brought her back with a start. Laughing, she knelt on the sand and wrapped her arms around Jewel. "See, Jewel, he must have come a long way. Let's welcome him to our home. Be nice now, Jewelie, and say hello."

Hand signals sufficed to instruct the dog how to act. Solemnly, Jewel sniffed a tendril. Slowly at first, then more rapidly, her tail began to wag. She sat down, and her long golden muzzle split in that sappy, endearing grin Sylvie had come to know so well.

Sylvie abruptly realized she was still gripping her ax. Retreating a few steps, she buried the blade harmlessly in a log, returning empty-handed to the alien form.

There was one last shudder of tension, and then she relaxed completely. Flat like gold coins, the luminous eyes gazed back at her. Tentative tendrils extended to touch her fingertips. They began to move as the alien body began to sway.

Hardly conscious of what she was doing, Sylvie felt herself rocking in unison with the alien, feeling the elastic strength of those deceptively thin fibrils. A tingling warmth seemed to spread outward from them and

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into her fingers, expanding to warm her whole body and mind. With it came a joyous lightness that made her want to laugh, to sing, to — dance.

"But I can't dance," she found herself whispering. "I — I've never danced, you know." She felt terribly silly and buoyantly happy, giddy as a schoolgirl. He couldn't possibly understand her words, but the way he swayed ever faster told her he knew, somehow.

All at once the tendrils tightened on her arms, contracting. She felt no fear. Up and around and down he swung her, lifting effortlessly to swing again. She felt light as a dandelion seed plucked from its stem to be toyed with by the wind. For an instant she was as small and mindless as that gossamer fluff of new life, reveling in the rush of air, the whipping weight of her long hair flying wildly out behind her, the dizzying whirl of the dance.

But she wanted to be more than a mindless partner. With a subtle tug, she indicated she wanted him to slow. They stood a moment while she observed the weaving interplay of the tendrils across his upper body and caught her breath. An emerald spark materialized in the air above them, gently illuminating the beach and surrounding branches and fronds. The rain had almost stopped, leaving the air pungent with pine and seaweed.

This time she started.

Slowly at first, then faster and faster, the dance began again. The first mad, exhilarating whirl had stripped every trace of shyness and reserve from her. She no longer cared if she appeared clumsy or if her lungs gasped for air while he spun about graceful and tireless. She wanted only to dance. Once she stumbled on the slippery pebbles, but before she could fall, she felt her feet rise clear off the ground as the silvery tendrils clasped her, strong and warm, turning the near disaster into a jeté of beauty and wonder.

As they spun down the shore in one long, stately gavotte, she took a moment to examine her familiar beach, giggling softly at how it must feel to be a stage for so strange and unlikely a pair of dancers. She saw Jewel, too, leaping and prancing excitedly beside them, caught up in the thrill and emotion of the dance. She felt a rush of affection for the dog.

"Jewel — Jewelie!" she called out breathlessly, hoping the animal would understand in the absence of the familiar hand signals. "Dance with us, Jewelie!"

Her pink tongue lolling and her eyes bright, the dog pirouted closer.

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Sylvie felt a brush of damp fur against her leg, but the tendrils clasped her so tightly she couldn't let go to pat Jewel. Instead, she saw one long filament reach out and caress the dog as she leaped by. Instantly the all-encompassing feeling of warmth expanded as the connection was made. It seemed to reach out to include not just the woman and the dog, but everything within the shell of green radiance that lit the beach. She knew it couldn't really be happening, but she could've sworn that the trees, the driftwood logs, even the rocks, were dancing with them, having somehow torn themselves free from the soil and ancient bedrock below to join with the reeling threesome of woman, dog, and alien genie.

Sylvie felt as though she were the one who'd been released from a bottle. She was seeing, *really* seeing, for the first time. The depression that had held her in its grip for months, years, was sloughing away like a winter coat in the warmth of a chinook.

An urgent ripple of green caught the corner of her eye. The strange craft no longer hovered immobile in the water offshore. It was gliding soundlessly through the black water, its lights winking in a complex, rapid pattern. Sylvie realized it was completely dark out now and that she was utterly exhausted. Jewel had flung herself down onto the cool shingle and was panting like a steam engine.

Part of her wanted to collapse on the sand alongside the dog. But that would mean surrendering the warmth of the alien's touch. A sense of life and joy and wonder flowed into her from him, and she didn't want it to stop. And there was something more.

He was glad, she felt. Glad he'd come to this isolated speck in space. Glad he'd taken the time to examine the strangeness that was Earth, and supremely pleased he'd met another who could not merely watch but could join in the Dance of Discovery.

One by one the filaments unwound from her wrists and waist. As each retracted, there was a slight lessening of the mental contact she'd experienced. The beach and surrounding trees resumed their ageless, stolid repose, seeming to regain a reserve cast aside for the duration of the dance.

Spent, Sylvie collapsed onto a wave-licked crescent of sand. Jewel loped over unsteadily and leaned heavily against her shoulder as if seeking comfort. Sylvie wrapped her arms around the dog, feeling the still-racing beat of Jewel's heart pacing her own.

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The alien craft was now so close it nearly rasped against the rocks, and the lights beckoned. . .

The alien craft was now so close it nearly rasped against the outthrusting rocks, and the lights beckoned imperatively. Sylvie could hear the slap of water against the enigmatic gray hull, the crunch of pebbles under the alien's weight as he slowly moved away from her. Somehow she found the strength to rise and stumble after him.

"Don't go — not yet! Dance with me again. . . ."

He turned at the sound of her voice, his flat gold eyes shining in the green light. His face, his whole stance, radiated regret. He'd like to stay, his eyes said to Sylvie's heart. Just one more dance on this strange shore, one more joining with a mind expansive enough to experience beauty and share it — but the universe is large, time hurtles past, and I must go, too.

She slowed as she neared him. One tendril reached out — not to push but to twine around her finger. It felt like a kiss.

Sylvie squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, then opened them as the tendril withdrew. She was determined to retain her composure so that she might soak up every impression and store it away in her mind.

The craft did not dip under the alien's weight, as a human's boat would. There was one last flash of gold-coin eyes before he ducked his crested head and flowed into the waiting hatchway. Sylvie felt tears prickling her eyelids, held them back with an effort. No tears would dim this last look at him. A faint hum came from the craft. She sank into a crouch and stared — intense, taut, scarcely breathing — as the small machine rose. Dripping, it turned silently and vanished with a soft, rippling rush of air into the night sky.

Gone, but the wave-battered beach was still full of him. Her fingers found a round pebble in the sand and brought it, gritty with clinging grains, to her lips. The tang of salt was sharp and alive. The hard, round warmth of it, warm on a chill, rain-drenched beach, was real. It was warmth she knew would be with her always. Nothing, not even the loss of its inspiration, could quench the joy she felt.

Jewel squatted patiently beside her, watching not the empty sky but her mistress's face. Reacting to Sylvie's slight shifting of muscles, the dog rose a split second before the woman did. Together they made their way

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back up the slippery steps, through the trees, and into the dark cabin.

Sylvie was exhausted, but too exhilarated to sleep. Instead, she built up the fire in the stove and set the water to boil for coffee. She prowled around, lighting every lamp in the house until the cabin glowed. The sight of the dishes in the sink, petrified in cold soapsuds, brought a smile to her lips. Two hours age she'd been ready to wade into the sea and end it all. Not for the first time she'd entertained such thoughts. Now they seemed memories lifted from the hollow mind of a stranger. With a burst of sheer joy, she spun on the spot, her arms held wide to encompass a fresh world.

There was the old quilt she'd found at a thrift store — why, there were pieces of velvet sewn into it that were the color of amber! The blue curtains, the rag rugs like drifts of autumn leaves on the floor, the haphazard pile of firewood next to the dry-stone fireplace — all seemed vibrant, colorful, alive.

The only things that jarred, that seemed incomplete and artificial, were her sad attempts at paintings.

The water having boiled, she made the coffee and stood before her easel, ruefully examining the half-done effort at depicting an old stump. The form was there accurately enough, and some clumsy groping toward expression and meaning, but — it was wrong, all wrong! It was awkward and facile and, and — obvious.

With a determined clack, she set the empty cup down on a table, took the painting in both hands, and snapped the stretcher boards, folding the canvas in half. She carried it over to the fireplace, tossed it in, and scrambled for kindling and matches. A funeral pyre for her old self. A small fire for a small artist. The oily canvas burned merrily, giving off more warmth and life in its death than it ever would have if brought to completion. She added logs until the cabin was filled with heat and golden flickering light. It wasn't the same warmth that had flowed into her from the alien, but it would do.

A client had given her a bottle of homemade blackberry wine last Christmas, as part payment for a drawing she'd done of their house. She'd never found reason to open it, until now. The occasion called for a toast, and her without even a proper wineglass. She rummaged through the cupboard until she came up with a clear plastic tumbler. The wine tasted like concentrated summer, the glass in her hand glowing like stained glass as she held it between her face and the fire. After one swallow and a

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drop spilled for the gods, she set it aside and forgot it.

There was something else she had to do, something more important than reminiscing. It was as celebratory a gesture as sipping wine, and in its own way it left her just as tipsy.

Placing a fresh canvas on the easel, Sylvie began to paint.

For once her eye and her hand were in perfect harmony. There was no hesitation, no pause to think about what she was going to paint. She painted the dance. The alien held the composition's center. Around him whirled Sylvie and Jewel, then the trees and rocks, sand and ocean, all joined together in great swirls of color and form that seemed ready to leap out of the little square and dance on the cabin floor.

It was the only painting she ever did of the alien. So vivid was her memory of him and that night, so detailed the remembrance, she could have done another at any time. But she never did. Just as she knew she'd never paint him again, she knew she'd never tell another soul what had happened. Not only would they think she'd gone dotty, but it was no concern of anyone else's. He'd been a spark that had relit a fire almost out, and then he'd gone away, never to return. Of that she was quite certain.

A pang of longing ran through her, halting her hand in mid-brushstroke. Never again to experience that special ecstasy.

But, she thought, if he'd stayed, I would surely have danced myself to death. This is better. I have that, and now I have myself anew also. I know now who I am.

Dawn found her curled up on the bed, the brush still clutched tightly in her hand. Jewel had hopped up beside her and lay with her golden head tucked under Sylvie's arm. Together they slept the morning away.

Pauline Howat looked up from the book she was reading at the tinkle of door chimes. Sylvie, wrestling a heavy, awkward package wrapped in brown paper through the door, had the satisfaction of seeing the gallery owner's jaw drop. Pauline recovered quickly, put her book aside, and hurried over to shut the door against the late-fall rain.

"Sylvia Rudd! My God, girl, you look like you've just popped out of a chrysalis. Where on earth have you been? And is that lipstick you're wearing?"

"Yes, indeed. 'Autumn Rose,' I think it's called. Got all dressed up to come to town." Sylvie laughed. "I've got some things I want to look at."

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Pauline's expression of genuine gladness to see Sylvie faltered. "Look, hon, the season's over." She turned to gesture at the gallery walls. "Look at all the stuff I've still got. I can't, really can't, take any more. I'm sorry."

She groaned inwardly as Sylvie blithely continued unwrapping the paper from the six canvases she'd brought. Sylvie tried so hard, but.... Pauline blinked, leaned slightly forward. A glimpse of a twisting, rippling, powerful shape, an explosion of dark color — what *had* the girl been doing?

Sylvie leaned the paintings here and there against the walls and display tables, not even bothering to find the best light. She was almost physically ill with the warring emotions running through her. Her calm smile hid two equally frightening thoughts: *What if they aren't as good as I think?* And, *What if they are?* What then? She bit her lip hard to force the tension down.

Pauline stared at the paintings, examining each in turn, bending to study some detail, then stepping back to study the composition as a whole. She lit a cigarette. "Damn. Thought I'd quit. Well, well."

She leaned back against the cash register in her little shop. She'd promised herself she'd start to slow down, take it easy. Retirement loomed close. Been planning it for years, and now in came the most exciting stuff she'd seen in years. She wrestled with her emotions, but not for long. The outcome was preordained. Maybe retirement was overrated.

She squinted through the smoke at Sylvie, who stood staring back at her expectantly, like a lily about to wilt.

"My dear girl, you know I can't take these — wait, wait, let me finish! I simply can't handle them." She prowled up and down the cramped store, thinking hard. Damn, but it was good to feel the old heart pumping again. "Hang on, I know who to call." She dug for her phone under a mound of silk scarves. "Long distance, please, operator. Vancouver." She gave the number and winked at Sylvie.

"Harry? Pauline here." After a brief nod at the usual formalities, she got to her point. "Listen, hon, who have you got for your November opening? Yeah? Well, find some room. Give me your big wall at the back. Of course I'm serious, you old bastard!" She held the phone away from her ear and hissed to Sylvie. "You got any more?" At Sylvie's bemused nod, she turned back to the phone.

"Harry, I'm sending a lady name of Sylvia Rudd over to see you." She

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caught Sylvie's look of dismay as she frantically shook her head "no," and changed in midstride. "O.K., never mind — I'll come myself! I'll take *you* to dinner, Harry. No, I'm not crazy. Not yet. Thursday!" She slammed the phone down and beamed at Sylvie.

"That was fun. Look, hon, you're going to need an agent. Now, I don't want to sound pushy, but...." She paused for a second, and, as she'd hoped, Sylvie spoke up.

"Pauline, I don't know anyone else. Please be my agent! Oh, that sounds awful." Her face burned red. "I meant, like, I trust you. I'm scared, and you're not. Please?"

The two women hugged, cementing, rather informally, a relationship that was to last for years.

While Pauline forged off to Vancouver with Sylvie's entire output for the past three months (minus that first painting she'd done, the one of the dance), Sylvie retreated to her little cabin and gave in to a case of the jitters.

"Oh Jewelie, can you imagine me trying to deal with that Harry Clemens?" She sat on the floor listening to the November wind rattle around the cabin. Jewel sighed contentedly beside her, quite happy to be so needed. Sylvie's two most recent paintings, the most ambitious of the series, had been too large to carry to Pauline's shop on the bus. She had no idea how the fickle art crowd on the mainland would like them.

"Pauline will deal with it all, thank God." She gave Jewel one last squeeze before leaping to her feet to stamp a quick, nervous jig across the floor. Jewel lifted her muzzle in one of her queer little deaf-dog yips. Together they raced out the door and down to the windswept beach.

Pauline had promised to let her know everything that transpired at the opening of Clemens Galleries' Winter Showing of West Coast Artists. Sylvie had adamantly refused to make an appearance at the wine-and-cheese party Harry was throwing in the gallery on the afternoon of the first day. She preferred to picture Pauline, back in her element at last, charming everyone.

The middle of the following week, Pauline sat sipping tea at Sylvie's kitchen table. Sylvie was staring at the elegant blue check held in her numb hands. It took her awhile to find her voice.

"All the paintings sold the first night?" she mumbled.

"All but three. They'll sell during the week, after people have seen the reviews."

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"Reviews?" Sylvie finally looked up from the check. "Where? Let me see!" She reached eagerly for the little pile of newsprint Pauline extracted from her bag.

"Aha," Pauline said. "I see that fame is more important than fortune! Now about my fee, hon. . . ."

Her voice trailed off in a quiet, private laugh as she saw that Sylvie wasn't listening. Artists! Who would have guessed that the little mouse she'd known casually for five years had been hiding a tigress-sized talent? What had finally unleashed it? Doubtless she'd never know. She rattled her teacup for attention.

"Listen, I demand that you get a phone. If you think I'm going to bounce along that miserable road every time you sell a painting, you're crazy. A phone, and a decent chair. My ass is killing me." She got up and slipped on her coat. Sylvie rose and flung her arms around the older woman.

"Thank you, thank you!"

"Just keep on painting, hon."

"Try and stop me!" Sylvie's eyes were sparkling as she walked Pauline to her car and waved her off along the dripping avenue of bare-branched trees. The twisting limbs danced an arabesque in brown across the cerulean sky. As soon as Pauline's car had vanished from sight, Sylvie turned briskly. There was enough light left in the sky to start another painting.

One of the first things she bought when she'd grown accustomed to having enough money to actually spend some of it was a stereo. She'd gone into town with the ambitious idea of a small portable radio, only to find herself easily persuaded, thanks to a demonstration disk of Mozart, to purchase an elaborate component system. The green indicator lights of the receiver made her think of the play of liquid emerald on the flanks of the alien craft. It wasn't until she got the boxes home and unpacked them that she remembered the cabin had no electrical service.

When she had stopped laughing long enough to talk, she gasped to Jewel, "Well, I guess this is it. We join the twentieth century."

She continued to paint by kerosene lamp, though, after the sun was gone. It was so familiar a glow, augmented by firelight, and gave a different feel to her paintings than did daylight. Pauline protested that she'd damage her eyes, but Sylvie argued that the light she painted by was as important to her work as the light she placed on canvas.

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With the next show, Sylvie proved she was no flash in the pan. Thanks to her enthusiastic output of work over that winter (Pauline called it relentless) and the spring and summer of the following year, she had enough of what she considered to be acceptable canvases for a one-woman show in the fall. Its success surpassed her previous showing. Pauline and Harry had placed fairly high prices on the works, and Sylvie had been worried about a possible buyer backlash. The only voices raised in protest, however, came from those people who competed for the right to buy the same painting. There seemed no doubt her work drew an emotional response from nearly everyone who saw it.

Reviews and commentary on her showings of the next several years were almost uniformly glowing. "There seems as yet to be no limit on the talent Rudd possesses," read one. "From her initial leap from obscurity to her present position as reigning queen of North American landscape artists, she has maintained the fresh, effervescent outlook that has revitalized a stagnating field. . . ." And another: "This week's opening of Rudd's latest, a series titled *Forest Dancing*, would need a lifetime to explore. As usual, Ms. Rudd's work has the vitality and grace of a dancer." Or, "Paintings that seem ready to leap off the wall and dance. . . ."

Her name was solidly established, yet Sylvie still couldn't quite believe they were talking about her. She painted what she felt — that was all. As in most art, a lot was left up to the viewer. They saw not only what she put down in oils, but also what they needed to see. Like her best art, her work transcended reality while accurately representing it. "Through a glass greenly," as one critic put it.

One hot summer evening she and Jewel found themselves walking toward the familiar goal of an outcropping of wave-smoothed rock. It was full of depressions perfectly suited for sitting and contemplating the eternal surge and retreat of the ocean. Freed by the regular repeating patterns of swirling foam and the interplay of grays and greens in the restless water, her mind could soar vast distances with ease, leaving her refreshed and serene. It was at such times that her thoughts reached out past the streaks of opal cloud that masked the sunset to probe the ever-night of space.

He was out there, somewhere.

She thought back to the day after that wild night. She hadn't needed the evidence of scuffed sand and kicked-up seaweed to prove it had really

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happened. It was too sharp in her memory, an indelible warmth she could call forth at will. A smile touched her lips. Unconsciously, her arms lifted and swayed a little, as if held by an invisible partner. After a while they fell back to her sides.

He was a wanderer, a voyageur through the immensity of space. She closed her eyes against the sunset and imagined the white points of stars burning inside her lids. *Come and visit this little planet again someday,* she thought. *The stars will always be there, but we won't.* Sylvie knew something of the relativistic time-dilation that must apply over such distances. *Our little lives flick in and out so fast. Don't forget us.*

A breeze plucked at her as the night called up an offshore wind. The rock had grown hard; the first stars showed. Gulls swept in formation across the wave tops, raucous and hurried. It was time to go home.

Sylvie was so deep in her pensive mood that she was well along the beach before she noticed that Jewel was lagging far behind. She crouched and slapped the damp sand a couple of times to hurry her up. Instead, Jewel slowed, stood for a moment with her head down, then lay flat out, giving a groan that Sylvie could hear over the waves.

Terrified, she ran to the dog and cradled the familiar head on her knees. Her fingers burrowed beneath the thick fur as she felt for the retriever's heart. It pumped violently, spasmodically. Old lungs labored, Jewel's breath wheezing out in great gasps. Gradually they slowed, becoming easier even as they grew intermittent. Her tongue flicked out to softly lick Sylvie's face as she bent close.

With the last of her strength, Jewel tried to stand, gathering her legs under her in a vain attempt to rise, only to fall back as every muscle went slack. The agate eyes dimmed, fixed on Sylvie to the last.

She rocked Jewel in her arms till the night closed in around both of them, her tears soaking into the rough fur.

The next morning, before dawn, Sylvie dug Jewel's grave under the dog's favorite hot-weather resting spot — the shade of the ancient, torn Douglas fir that stood guard over the cabin. Another partner in the dance had gone. Her last link with that night. She realized as she sat beside the cairn of stones she'd raised over the grave just how much she'd depended on an old, deaf dog for love and companionship. She'd needed her more than than she needed or wanted the people in her life.

But — she had her work. The desire, the need to paint, would always

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be there, as would her memories of warmth, of an old, faithful dog.

Of a dance. . . .

When Sylvie was thirty-nine, she spent a year as artist-in-residence at the University of Toronto. Though she missed her beloved West Coast passionately, she tried to think of her honored exile as a learning experience, one that was undoubtedly good for her. The seminars she led were enjoyable, the chance to sample the vital work that was going on in the eastern centers was eye-opening, and the landscapes she found in the Ontario lakelands were glorious. The autumn colors outdid anything British Columbia could show.

She and two other women, one a sculptor she had met at a gallery, the other the gallery's owner, spent a week canoeing in Algonquin Park, following in the footsteps (or rather, the paddle strokes) of Tom Tompson, A. Y. Jackson, and the like, rediscovering the magnificence of the northern wilderness. Sylvie made some good friends that year. She was almost sorry to leave, but it was wonderful to be going back to her island again.

Within a day of her return to the tiny cabin, she resolved to build a new home. The cabin would stay. Though it was cramped and primitive, she couldn't bear the thought of its being torn down. It was as much a part of her as her bones.

Pauline and Harry Clemens, who to everyone's relief had finally married, were welcome-home visiting the following day, when the subject of houses came up. Over coffee, Pauline examined Sylvie's sketches critically.

"You're going to need more cupboard space. And what about this kitchen? Way too small! You've given all the space to the studio, of course." She chuckled maternally.

Harry, a round, swarthy man inches shorter than the elegant Pauline, smiled at Sylvie. "Don't pay any attention to her. She just likes to meddle. I think it's superb. That west window must be twenty feet high!"

Sylvie loved the old couple. Pauline still spent summers at her craft shop and gallery, where Harry joined her when things got hectic in the city. They were still an active force in the Vancouver art world, and she always gave Harry first crack at much of her noncommissioned work.

Leaving Harry poring over the plans, the two women took their cups and wandered around the cabin. There were always new paintings on the walls, and Sylvie relished Pauline's shrewd comments.

The taller woman suddenly paused. She wormed her way past piles of

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fresh canvas and stretcher boards back into a dark corner. "What's this one back here, Sylvie? I've never seen it before."

Sylvie's heart thumped. She'd never bothered to sequester the one painting she would never let go, the one of the dance. She laughed nervously. "My one little foray into fantasy art. It's not for sale, of course. Just a keepsake, really. Just fooling around one day with something different."

Pauline was frowning. "Don't give me that. This is an absolutely passionate piece of work. I've never seen anything like it. Why don't you do more?"

"No — no, I don't think I could," Sylvie told her softly. "Someday, maybe, I'll tell you about it."

Pauline had to let it go at that, accepting more coffee in lieu of answers. She thoroughly approved of the grand new house that soon rose, all cedar and glass and containing every convenience, but Sylvie never did confide in her.

One day another dog turned up, this one in Pauline's arms. "You must take it, hon. The poor little thing. I'd keep her, but Harry won't have a dog. Allergies. Look at those eyes. . . ."

The Samoyed pup was an irresistible puff of white. Sylvie named her Pearl. Any lingering feelings of disloyalty to Jewel soon gave way before the new dog's exuberant affection.

Other dogs followed over the years. They passed in and out of her life, always given names like Ruby, Emerald, Topaz. They lightened her loneliness. Each and every one of them learned sign language. Without realizing it, Sylvie taught them Jewel's old hand signals along with the verbal commands, until they were adept at both.

Students came and went, too, staying for summers in the guest wing of the house and painting under her direction and encouragement in the cabin. Sylvie found she still preferred to paint there. Though comfortable and full of light from the huge windows, the new house lacked the special warmth of the dingy little cabin.

One or two men entered her life, but only briefly. Sylvie wasn't a complete hermit anymore, and she had matured from a shy, pale girl into a graceful, confident woman that a certain kind of creative man found compelling, even challenging. But she was difficult to live with, given to withdrawing into herself for days at a time. When she was painting, it was as though she were in another world. So the men would grow discouraged

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after a time by her oblivious self-sufficiency, and regretfully move on. Then she would sigh and breathe a little easier, alone again with her memories. She was not unhappy, nor did she regret the loss of lovers, knowing all along that nothing could equal the moments of ecstasy she had felt all those years ago when she had danced with something from across experience, space, and time.

She collected friends, though. Pauline and Harry were both gone now, but there was a constant flow of painters, poets, sculptors, and musicians through her house. Many came to pay homage to the artist and stayed to befriend the woman.

Honors and fame accrued. Her works hung in most of the world's major galleries, and many private collections. A large painting of totem poles against a background of enigmatic, kinetic trees was among the gifts sent by her country to the coronation of King William. There was always a young person in the house now, and she was glad of it. No longer was she able to race along the beach with her dogs, or spend hours before the easel without a thought of tomorrow. Her friends had thoughtfully made sure that a student, strong and willing to do anything for the great lady, was always on duty.

It irked Sylvie sometimes. Growing old was so restricting. To get a little peace, she had to slip off for walks in the woods while the youngsters were off running errands. One day she came into the house to find her latest protégé, a nineteen-year-old girl who reminded her painfully of herself at that age, rather guiltily clutching a pup to her chest.

"I know how much you like dogs, Ms. Rudd. I hope you don't mind. Here." She approached shyly and allowed the small, furry face to work its magic. "He's for you."

"Oh my. I'd given up dogs. I just can't keep up with them anymore."

"Please? He's a stray."

"Oh well, then." Unable to resist any longer, Sylvie took the tiny black and white mongrel, hiding her face in the soft fur so the girl wouldn't see her tears. "I'll name you Diamond."

The dog wriggled eagerly in her old arms. "You'll outlast me, won't you, you silly little live wire?" she whispered to the pup.

How silly of me to cry, she thought. Is it because I can feel the end coming, and this little one is just beginning? My eyes are dim now with more then just sentimental tears. In another year or so, I'll be unable to

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paint. Painting is all I have, really. That, and one's memories, but they wear so thin through all the years of pulling them out and wearing them like clothes out of an old trunk. She raised her face from the ball of energy and stared out a window into the woods.

My dear Jewel, are you padding softly along your old paths in the forest, and does your spirit still remember how to dance? Mine does. This body is worn-out, but my soul will never forget.

Inevitably, Diamond picked up the hand signals that Sylvie used without thinking. He was a clever, wiry bundle of affection, and he followed her around like a dapper little butler, or led the way along familiar routes with the air of a competent scout. He loved his daily romps with Anne, the young student who'd rescued him, but he was Sylvie's dog.

"I swear that Diamond can read your mind." Anne was still puffing from her daily run along the beach. "He always takes his time listening to me, but for you he jumps before you even speak."

Sylvie smiled. "How's the still life coming along? And have you called your parents lately?"

Anne grimaced and disappeared down the stairs to her bedroom. The girl had promised, but if Sylvie didn't crack the whip now and then, she knew Anne would spend too much time playing with Diamond, and dreaming about some boy or other. She hesitated. Perhaps her students resented her dedication to work. Perhaps she should indulge them and let them play.

There had been no one to crack the whip over you, Sylvie, my old dear, she mused. It had taken a different kind of incentive, a strange spark indeed, to set you working.

She struggled with a mind tired by age. There. She experienced a small thrill of triumph. She could summon it up still, the dizzy warmth that filled her again as if she'd just finished dancing. The memory hadn't failed her in all these years. Still strong. Still powerful.

Still there.

IT WAS the last week of August of Sylvie's seventy-eighth year. The accumulated heat of a long, dry summer hovered like dust motes in the air of the old cabin. She rubbed tiredly at her eyes. The painting she'd started could wait while she slipped out into the evening-shadowed forest. For once she was alone. A concert in town had taken her latest student-*cum*-nurse off for the night. It was just Sylvie

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and her dog, the way it used to be.

She called Diamond, then realized the animal must be outside already.

The day's heat had thickened until the coming rain was a palpable tension in the air. Sylvie could feel it in her skin as the soil and the dry leaves must feel it — an elemental need.

As she stepped out the back door of the cabin, she could hear the rustling of the first raindrops high up in the leaves. The air stirred, shivered.

Diamond was barking down on the beach. A regular bark; not excited. She closed her eyes and drew a deep, slow breath of water-scented air.

You've come back, she said in her mind. *I'll dance with you again.*

Carefully, afraid she might fall, she groped her way through the gathering night, feeling as though every nerve had just been plucked like a string and emitting a clear, high note of joy. The rain began to hiss through the dusty shawls of cedar, parting the green gate of pendant maple leaves, hurrying her down the last stone steps to the shore where Diamond stood waiting, his tail slowly wagging.

Sylvie's heart raced at the sight of the alien. Though she had no way of knowing, he appeared unchanged, the same as he'd been half a century ago. The rain in her hair and beading her eyelashes made the years between their meetings impossible to believe. Overhead, looking like a tiny green star adrift in the heavens, the same emerald spark shed a soft radiance that glinted off the wet rocks and the drooping, bobbing ranks of leaves. The alien's craft was barely visible, a gray ghost seated in the roiling mist offshore.

Diamond sat down in the sand and looked solemnly from Sylvie to the glimmering alien visitor. As Sylvie went unhesitatingly toward it, the dog stood instantly on guard though he sensed there was no harm in what was happening. Soon he relaxed again, ears pricked forward, head cocked to one side, watching.

Fingers and tendrils touched. Eyes of flat, pupil-less gold met eyes of age-dimmed blue. A silent renewal of an old friendship was exchanged.

The body swayed; the tendrils contracted. Sylvie smiled. It was easier this time, though no less exhilarating, no less special. She remembered. So did he.

The dance began.

She found strength in her old legs that she didn't know she possessed

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until that strange warm wine of feeling rushed into her as it had that first, unforgettable time. Laughing with delight, she dropped a stiff curtsy. Rising, she felt the tendrils coil around her arms and waist, to tighten and lift.

She gasped with the sheer joy of it as they whirled round and round through the summer night. The years fell away like yellowed pages torn from an old paperback book. In heart and soul and spirit, and maybe a little in body, too, she was a girl again. Between the forest and the sea was their own private, timeless world.

Sylvie could feel her heart pounding and clenching painfully. Knowing she should stop dancing, she also knew she could not. *It's more than my life is worth,* she thought, *to let go now. If it's my death, then let it be. I don't care — as long as I dance. I've waited a long time.*

She gave herself up wholly to the strength of the deceptively thin fibrils, letting her head fall back like a child's on a swing. She was floating in a net of silver, drifting like a boat held in the liquid arms of the sea, or like a dandelion seed on the wind. . . .

Her body seemed to grow lighter and lighter, the night sky and shore to fade until there was nothing left but the glow of gold-coin eyes. A spreading warmth grew into a burst of radiant white like a star in her chest, flaring until she was consumed, blown away like a puff of smoke.

The dancer slowed, his limp burden light as air in the cradle of tendrils. Questing, the delicate tips probed here and there, touching the eyelids, the lips, twining with the dance-tousled hair. Gently, the visitor laid the thin form on the sand, regarding it. It looked up toward the tree-lined cliff, then stopped to enclose the body once more in his tendrils. Handling the weight easily, he carried Sylvie up the stone steps and into the cabin, placing her on the couch before the empty fireplace.

Diamond had followed. Confused now, he jumped up beside his mistress, frantically licking her face and peering anxiously into her sightless eyes. He butted his wet black nose under her chin as if to remind her that it was time to get up.

Finally, he jumped down, sat on the floor, and howled.

The alien stood silently in the dim, musty cabin. One tendril slowly extended to touch Diamond between the ears. A feeling of warmth suffused the air between them. Diamond cocked his head as if listening, his howls of grief subsiding to a whine. Then he whimpered and was quiet.

Turning, the visitor studied the interior of the old building, moving

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from canvas to artifact. He was thorough and missed nothing. Eventually his attention was drawn to a small painting, shoved into a corner near the back. It showed a dancing young woman, a big golden dog frozen in mid-jump, and a creature not of Earth. Enveloping the threesome was an explosion of movement, a swirl of air, water, trees, beach pebbles, all of it dancing and alive, all caught forever on a small square of canvas. It was not a painting but a window, a window into an Earthly soul: a woman who had loved her home and her art and who had loved strangeness, too, and was not afraid.

There were many paintings on the walls: of beach and rocks, trees and sky, whales and otters, all executed in the unique kinetic style that made each one irrespective of subject matter seem about to break into dance. Many were more polished, more mature than the one in the corner, but the tendrils reached out only for that one. They lifted it clear of the wall, holding firmly as they had firmly held its creator.

The visitor turned for the door. A different whine made it pause. After one last lick at Sylvie's hand, Diamond trotted forward. He seemed to struggle within himself, as though striving to express something beyond ken and capability of a mere dog. His muscles tense with effort, he leaped into the air and performed a small, solitary pirouette, landing with eyes bright and ears pricked eagerly forward.

The alien seemed to stand a little straighter. The crested head lifted, and the tendrils glowed, exuding a warmth that filled the whole cabin. He did not so much leave as march out into the mist-filled night.

Diamond glanced one last time back at the couch and its silent, peaceful occupant. Then he turned as though responding to an unvoiced call and followed the visitor out into the rain, along the path that led through the forest to the beach.

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From the author of the Helliconia novels and the brilliant history of SF, TRILLION YEAR SPREE, comes this extrapolation of AIDS, or something like it, into a tale about a vision of innocence in a world of disease, misery and greed . . .

How an Inner Door Opened to My Heart

By Brian W. Aldiss

But only gods can make a tree.

— Old song

I FOUND A WALKING in the sanctuary of the museum grounds. Just pleasantly walking. Strolling as if she did it every day. Naked, absolutely confident, friendly, anonymous.

Where she walked, flowers sprang up under the imprint of her bare feet.

We keep the grounds well guarded. Nobody can get to The Six. Nobody has ever managed to break in from the tormented outside. Not one of our trees has ever been stolen. How, then, did the beautiful, anonymous A get in?

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It was a question she never answered. She appeared to know nothing, not even her name. How did she speak? It was always hard to recall, after that musical voice had ceased. I know only that she spoke my language.

Encountering her suddenly, I prepared to challenge her, but the words died on my lips. To meet a young naked woman who greets you unsmilingly, without self-consciousness, without any attempt to cover herself, is confusing. The conventions fall away before that frank nudity. You feel humble. Whatever might be said would seem irrelevant.

So there it was. Suddenly the well-ordered world is mysterious. I had been dreaming of creating a banyan. Standing before her, I was the one at a loss.

She came with me complacently to my apartment, to my office, and allowed me to question her. There she sat, relaxed on my mauve sofa, one slender arm upon the sofa arm and her legs crossed. She regarded me through her violet eyes, courteously telling me that she had no idea who she was or where she had come from.

She waited upon my questions. She had no questions to ask me. She showed no particular interest in her surroundings, as the daylight fell across her calm breasts and shoulders.

How could I help staring at her, at those shoulders, those breasts, that lovely face? Through my mind ran questions I could not ask. Was she in some way deranged? Could this be part of a criminal plan, involving others? Even more fantastic notions passed amid my thoughts. And — what would The Six say?

Did not the arrival of A signal a crisis in our relationship?

Requesting A to remain where she was, I walked over to my desk and rang Security. They had nothing untoward to report. The barrier on the wall had not been breached. As I talked to the captain, I studied a reflection of A in a wall mirror. Although it was difficult to see her clearly, I could appreciate how composedly she sat on the sofa, gazing ahead of her without tension. Her dark hair seemed to surround her head like a nimbus. Undoubtedly she was lovely — almost too lovely too perfect, to be human. Her misty reflection seemed to fade and flicker at my thought. It was a relief that Stephanie was away on business that day, or no doubt I would be in trouble. Stephanie had no time for rivals.

Since this was a Thursday, we directors who formed The Six had an early meeting timetabled as usual in the museum. This presented a prob-

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lem. I could not take A along with me, even if I dressed her in Stephanie's clothes; relationships among The Six were too delicate for that. Nor did I wish to leave her alone in the apartment, in case she did something unpredictable, or in case she disappeared in the same mysterious way she had arrived. I wanted her for myself. An intense yet oddly unfocused desire had seized me.

A must have sensed my uncertainty. As I went over to the music stack and let Scandinavian chords flood into the room, she moved to the window and stood gazing out. It was how I afterward remembered her, looking toward something unseen. I found myself drawn to where she had been sitting. In the pink cushion of the sofa, she had left the imprint of her naked bottom. I sank down and pressed my face to that perfect imprint.

Ashamed of the impulsive act — suddenly furious with myself — I jumped up and left the room. She would have to do whatever she had to do. I hated to feel a woman's power over me, however much I sought it.

In our museum — known simply as The Six — we housed reproductions of fifty-two kinds of tree. All were created in our workshops. Our rule was to work from photographs and paintings, and every tree was perfect in every detail, at whatever stage in its life cycle we chose to represent it.

The six of us — the six, that is, after Betty Jule died — had been interested purely in the artistic aspect when we were making our first three or four trees, shortly after graduation. A tree was just an art project to us, a series of moderately complex problems to be solved by the application of flair and logic, and perhaps with the correct plastic material. We might as well have tried to reconstruct a megatherium, but a larch had seemed at the time to present a more interesting challenge.

Our first exhibition was a greater success than even we had anticipated. The public that arrived to view our six trees was impelled less by aesthetic considerations than by nostalgia. They wanted to see, to walk round, to stand under objects that had actually still existed on Earth only a century earlier.

From then on we never looked back. The very rich almost immediately wanted a The Six tree in their homes. We sculpted trees in all stages of their growth. We automated our methods. Soon we were supplying stands of trees, copses, even woods, all over the world. All six of us became

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famous. Stephanie sang. I conducted symphonies. The great Aristo directed movies.

Always we made trees. Some were designed to re-create various times of year. We never did generalized trees; they were left to our competitors. Ours were always individual, sometimes with blemishes on them, fungi and so on. Once we created a dozen date palms in pure silver for the crown prince of Saudi Arabia. Within three years of our first sapling, all six of us in the partnership were millionaires. That was really before the contamination laws were tightened. Since then we stayed within the ample grounds of the museum. It was our castle, its doors closed to the outside world. The public was allowed to view daily, but only by android extensions. The privileged alone had audience with us in person.

We were three women and three men after Betty died. The sexual tensions between us were considerable. Lust and jealously were like tidal forces that threatened to tear us apart. But the sense of a prospering and worthwhile project kept us together. Besides, who would wish to be at large in the illness-crippled world?

BETTY JULE and Aristide ("Aristo") Smith had been the one married couple among the seven of us. She was artistic; he could handle money. We all worked together in a big warehouse studio and were pretty poor in those days. When we had a chance to buy the ground floor of the building, we took it. We all moved in. I should add, we all got ourselves screened, to prove to each other and maybe ourselves that we were carrying none of the killer sexual diseases circulating in the city.

After three years of their marriage, Aristo found out that, for most of that time, Betty had been having a secret love affair with Winston Watson Bulawayo. Winston was really the guy who started us off on trees, back in college. A terrible showdown took place. Winston and Aristo traded blows, though neither was a violent man. Aristo swore and emoted and threatened suicide, but it was Betty who actually overdosed in a friend's weekend compartment. She left a message saying she loved both men and could not give either up.

A bad time, that. I fell in love with Stephanie Hao, who had been living in a mildly lesbian relationship with our public relations lady, Claudia Cadwallader. Stephanie was small, blonde, slender, not really my type, but

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she had something to offer I could hardly define. Gradually our relationship became warm; gradually she could accept me. She was a laughing lady, Stephanie. Claudia, by contrast, was solemn and cool.

After some while, Aristo, who was really the head of our outfit, took up close relations with Su Mindanao, the member of our team I have not mentioned so far. Su was a chemist, tall, slim, dark, inventive, sparkling, often moody. She and I had lived together our last year in college, and a stormy time that had been. Not that we regretted it, and I guess the fondness we felt for each other was still alive, because just now and then we managed to sneak a few private, lustful hours together without Stephanie or Aristo finding out. They were all so jealous. Well, we all suffered for love.

This Thursday morning I was thinking of none of them as I crossed the path over to the main block. I thought of the meeting, which promised to be a tough one. Aristo had summoned our chief bankers because we had to decide whether to open a tree park in the center of Rigel City, on the other side of the continent. I also thought of the strange woman, whom I have so far called simply A. Soon I took to calling her Mary — not because that was her name, but because such a womanly woman deserved better than an initial.

Claudia Cadwallader came out the building to meet me, linking her arm in mine. Like the rest of us, she was in her mid-to-late thirties, but there was something endearingly childish in her appearance — a misleading impression, since Claudia was nothing if not high-powered. Not only was she our most sensitive sculptor, she also ran the actual museum itself, with all its administrative problems, as well as handling its delicate relationship with the fevered and near-anarchic city beyond its walls.

"Aristo isn't here," she said. "He's had to jet to Venezuela to see about that missing shipment of soybeans."

"I thought we had that all in hand?" I looked at her sharply.

"It is the third shipment to go missing this year." She spoke in her normal reserved way, which some found soothing, some irritating.

"But why did he have to go today?"

I said nothing else as we went up the steps, and then: "We can make no decisions without Aristo and Stephanie being present."

She squeezed my arm. "Dean, Aristo knows that. Don't you think that's why he went off today? It buys us time with the bank."

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We went together to the meeting. Winston Bulawayo and Su Mindanao joined us on the mezzanine, and we entered the board room together. That's the way we always work, showing a united front whatever our personal differences. There had been a time when Su was fit to kill Winston. They had been living together, but Winston was making it with Claudia. What a fight! — We had all become involved, and no one was speaking to anyone else for a whole week. Nevertheless, the six of us had walked together into a meeting, and together had staved off an attempt by Global Glutamate to buy us up.

So after the meeting, when we had managed to hold everyone off on the Rigel City enterprise (Rigel was a fine commercial proposition, but unfortunately, its disease statistics were horrific — and rising), we took a drink in Directors Bar, and I told the other three about Mary, my naked lady.

A lot of jokes went by. We all laughed, except Claudia, who smiled, but beneath it was a lot of angst. They were unwilling to believe me. Winston was jealous, the ladies suspicious, thinking maybe I was trying to smuggle in a pet without a health clearance.

"And what is Stephanie going to say?" Su asked.

It was all fun enough, no worse than I had expected, and it ended with a challenge to me. They should come over to my place and meet Mary. On the whole, we had tended to keep away from each other's places of late.

"Let's go," I said. The staff was taking care of public viewing. We could afford to have a little fun.

But Stephanie's and my apartment was empty. I called. We all looked. It developed into a game. There was no sign of Mary. Only the indent on the cushion. She had gone as mysteriously as she had come.

Of course I phoned Security, but again they had no report of anyone unlawful on the grounds. The others started on a heavy bout of teasing. I had to let them get on with it, while protesting that I had certainly not imagined the lady.

When they left, I sat down with a shot glass of whiskey and asked myself, Had I really imagined Mary?

Only a moment of weakness allowed the question to slip into my mind. I was a rational person, leading a well-regulated life. My artistic ability was never in doubt, and I enjoyed the respect of my peers. My career was a success; I skiied once a year in American Antarctic; above all, my liaison with Stephanie was a fulfilling one. Mary had been real enough

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for there to be a prosaic explanation for her appearance. Mary? No, that was a wrong name, too tranquil. Madonna? Salome?

Unusually for me, I allowed myself to sit drinking, getting no benefit from the alcohol, but enjoying the drama of the situation. I told myself I was waiting for Stephanie to ring. Stephanie didn't ring. I took another drink. I played my own music.

Then I went to bed.

On the wall of our bedroom hung a painting by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the nineteenth-century English artist. It was called *How They Met Themselves*, and depicted a couple, richly caparisoned, meeting another identical couple in a forest. In these stiff figures I had always found a disturbing quality, which reminded me now, as I gazed at them, of Stephanie's pained exclamation when we had been having a quarrel: "Oh, living! Isn't it like being lost in some damned forest?" Just as if there were still forests, as I reasonably pointed out.

"More like being locked behind a door," I had replied.

Now I lay down, and the doors of sleep opened to me. I seemed to be moving over a stretch of water made dark by tall surrounding trees, approaching a mountainous island, where a grand gate opened into the rock. It was in doubt whether I entered there.

Before dawn I woke, roused by sounds in the room. As if a dream continued, I felt no surprise on finding that Mary was back with me. She stood by the tall curtains, pulling them aside just enough to peer out. Something in her attitude suggested anticipation. She was, as ever, naked. The pallor of the predawn sketched in the outlines of her figure.

Kneeling on the bed, I began to recite to her, to utter an incantation. Perhaps I was drunk, not knowing where the words came from.

"Your womanly figure with its full hips, your virginal body with its pale flesh, your slender waist and swelling bosom, that mouth with greedy lips, that generous flowing hair — all make me repent how I hungered for so many lewd conquests. Come to me, Mary. Come to bed with me and make me whole. . . ."

It was like someone else's voice speaking. She turned, came toward me on naked feet. With an extended hand, she touched my cheek. I clutched her wrist. Yes, she was real enough.

"You don't desire me, and you must not have me. I am not yours to

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possess. What you wish for is my innocence, but I cannot restore innocence to you."

These words, spoken gently, had a profound effect on me. In contradictory fashion, they filled me with both joy and melancholy, just as the situation, though totally unprecedented, had for me a haunting familiarity I was at a loss to explain.

"I want you, I desire you, like no other woman I have ever known. Come into bed with me — we'll talk, only talk."

"You know what you have lost. You must understand that I cannot restore that loss; only you could do that. Look at the world about you and see its greed. See the misery that greed causes the greedy. You must not want so much. You must not want me."

Her voice sank to a whisper. Terrified, I said, "Don't leave me. I want to understand what you are saying. I don't understand a word of it."

Yet, even as I spoke, I did understand. She had opened an inner door.

"You must not seek to dominate me. I have a gift to give." As she whispered these words, so bemusing to my senses, she sank down so that her breath was on my lips. Then she kissed my lips.

I sank back without attempting to capture her. Although it felt as if she was still talking, my curious state of mind prevented me from being sure. Never had I experienced such pure rapture. My mind filled with the idea that she had arrived from a distant saffron planet, yet, by a ridiculous contradiction, the planet was somewhere near at hand, concealed.

The phone rang, and by automatic reflex I switched on even before I was awake. The clear voice of Stephanie in my ear announced that she was at the skyport and would be back at the museum — she did not say home — in an hour's time.

It was a bright morning. The long drapes at the window had been parted slightly. So *she* had been there, and possessed corporeal being. A kind of lust and homesickness drove me out of bed and into a search of the whole apartment. She had gone again. Would she return? Had there been a finality about our conversation? And what on earth was it she had said?

In a rather lost way, I heated a cup of coffee, showered, had my daily injection, and made my way over to the museum. The earlier sunlight had been swallowed in the city's self-made overcast.

Winston Bulawayo greeted me cheerfully and took me to one side.

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"Hey, Dean, what do you think? I made it with Su last night! Just like old times, except — wuh, that lady's so much more experienced now. . . ."

I did not immediately respond. He added, "Well, old Aristo was away, so I grabbed my chance. . . ."

For some reason I felt depressed. I clapped him on the back, but could not help saying, "There'll be hell to pay if Aristo finds out. He and Su were so happy."

"Not as happy as you might think," he said, looking rather angry at the implied criticism. "Nothing's permanent. In fact, Su is thinking of breaking it up and moving in with me."

"How's Claudia going to feel about that?"

He stopped and put his solid form in my path. "What's the problem with you this morning, Dean? You were always a kind of moody guy, anyway. I've seen the way you look at Claudia. Lay off her, will you? I can look after Claudia *and* Su."

"And Aristo? Isn't he due back this morning?"

The two ladies, Su and Claudia, appeared on the scene, both looking rather upset. Winston's and my conversation ended abruptly, which was just as well, perhaps. He gave me a black look before turning to greet Su.

Inside, I felt deeply disturbed without knowing why.

"Did you have a good night with your naked lady friend?" Claudia asked me, looking solemn as usual, so that it was hard to judge how seriously to take her. Before I could answer, she said, "Su says that Aristo rang her to say he will be back here midday. When does Stephanie get back?"

"Soon." It was all I could manage to say. A chill suspicion had entered my mind.

Excusing myself, I took the elevator to my office on the fourth floor. In a short while I was through to our suppliers in Venezuela. They dealt with the growers who had cleared the last of the Venezuelan forests to grow the soybeans that formed a vital constituent of the plastic from which we made our artificial trees. Of recent months they had been having trouble with hijackers who had stolen their products. They sounded calm enough over the air: No, they had not had the pleasure of a visit from Mr. Aristide Smith.

I cut the link. Compelled by an inner pain, I ran down the emergency stairs and out across the park to the main gate, where the guard, recogniz-

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ing me, allowed me to escape into the street. There I walked, pacing furiously, not caring if I looked distraught.

There was no doubt in my mind that Aristo and Stephanie had met somewhere in a private rendezvous. They had spent the day in each other's arms. Laughing, lustful extravagant Stephanie. Covetous, grasping, lascivious Aristo. The treachery of them both....

At the corner of the wall that surrounded the museum grounds was a big video advert for our exhibition. It showed the six of us, all immaculate and aloof, being beautiful people. Healthy, wealthy, glittering with success. Our clothes proclaimed our excellence. But under the clothes, I thought.... I turned and pressed into the streets and arcades of the city.

People everywhere. Staring or not staring. Many talking to themselves. A man on a corner in a black outfit, cursing aloud. Many of them women veiled, toting guns. This was the place we had nicknamed the Big Addle. Despite the warmth of the day, men and women were wearing gloves, all naked skin being covered as a guard against disease. Everywhere, forms slouching, running crookedly, or moving hesitantly, anxious to avoid human contact. The run-down puritan world from which we, The Six, had escaped via our success.

And Stephanie had betrayed me. So upset was I that I paid no heed to the danger I was in. I simply had to walk, and be away from all the calculating glances of those I knew so well. What had Stephanie said after her last abortion? "Dean, our lives take precedence over anyone or anything else...." Our lives? We had no common life anymore. This was going to be another of Aristo's triumphs, demonstrating his ascendancy. Bitterly, I thought how little he cared about Betty Jule's death — and she so tender. Well, no, really a calculating woman, who had certainly been cruel enough to me when she had caught me with Stephanie, years earlier....

The crowds grew denser toward city center. There were queues at the clinics, the windows of which were protected by metal bars. Ambulances, flashing and blaring, made their way only slowly along the roads. CHASTITY SPELLS LIFE,said the billboards. MASTURBATION SAVES, they said. CONNECTION BREEDS INFECTION, they said.

Mary was standing naked among the crowds. She was looking here and there in an abstracted way. The crowds jostled her, yet curiously did not give her a second look. Possibly they were shocked. More likely they regarded this as yet another government attempt to enforce the puritanical

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way of life: anyone touching her would have been immediately arrested.

As I tried to make my way toward her, waving and calling, she turned and went down a side alley. Pushing people away to either side, ignoring their horrified looks, I ran after her.

The alley was empty. There was a church of some kind down there, advertising itself with a holosign: The Church of the Deep Minders. Not a trace of Mary. I ran down the alley, looked into the church. She had gone.

An acid sprinkle of rain drifted down. I sheltered in the porch of the church. Exhaustion and disgust overcame me.

There was no place for me here. I belonged in the museum. I was of The Six. I must go back and face the latest crisis. Perhaps we were all on earth to be tortured by our sexuality, that gift we had turned to such bad use.

As I started back, a cop car snarled to a halt. Two police jumped out and grabbed me. Despite my struggles and protests, I was thrown into the compartment at the back of the car. In short order I found myself in a shabby precinct office, answering charges of indecent dress. I was wearing my usual gold lamé suit with my brown slippers and silver wig — my everyday dress, in fact. But hands, face, and upper chest were exposed. It was a violation of the laws.

They were slightly impressed when I said that I was one of The Six. Had I proof that I was Dean Morsberg? No, I had no documentary evidence on me; but they had merely to ring the museum, and confirmation would be forthcoming.

So they put me in a cooler. My clothes were taken from me; I was made to shower; blood samples were taken by a nurse in an air suit. It was afternoon before the police put a call through to The Six. No, Dean Morsberg was right there with them, and they did not know who the imposter was that the police were holding.

My rage knew no bounds. So that was what Aristo and Stephanie were up to! The forests of their lust had sprung up and lost me. This was their plan to keep me out of the way while they enjoyed the fruits of each other's body. . . .

Charges of contamination and impersonation began to look menacing. My anger faded before outraged feelings of anxiety. How was I to get back into the stronghold where I belonged? I put a call through to our lawyers as soon as I could; but from their stonewalling responses, I knew that Aristo had got to them first.

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A year in the slammer would be what I would get. Then they would have me back. After all, I was still a part of The Six. Twelve months was how long they calculated their passionate and eternal feelings for each other would last. Then they would let me back. If I remained free of disease that long. . . .

That night, in the silences of the noisy station, my cell door swung open and in walked Mary again, naked, innocent, gentle of eye. She would not give herself to me. She uttered but one word.

"Forgive!"

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Jane Yolen's stories have been appearing in F&SF for many years, but she is also one of the premier authors of children's books in this country and recently received the Kerlan Award for a distinguished body of work in children's literature.

Dusty Loves

By Jane Yolen

THERE IS AN ash tree in the middle of our forest on which my brother Dusty has carved the runes of his loves. Like the rings of its heartwood, the tree's age can be told by the number of carvings on its bark. *Dusty loves . . .* begins the legend high up under the first branches. Then the litany runs like an old tale down to the tops of the roots. Dusty has had many, many loves, for he is the romantic sort. It is only in taste that he is wanting.

If he had stuck to the fey, his own kind, at least part of the time, Mother and Father would not have been so upset. But he had a passion for princesses and milkmaids, that sort of thing. The worst, though, was the time he fell in love with the ghost of a suicide at Miller's Cross. *That* is a story indeed.

It began quite innocently, of course. All of Dusty's love affairs do. He was piping in the woods at dawn, practicing his solo for the Solstice. Mother and Father prefer that he does his scales and runs as far from our

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pavilion as possible, for his notes excite the local wood doves, and the place is stained quite enough as it is. Ever dutiful, Dusty packed his pipes and a cress sandwich and made for a Lonely Place. Our forest has many such: dells silvered with dew, winding streams bedecked with morning mist, paths twisting between blood-red trilliums — all the accoutrements of faerie. And when they are not cluttered with bad poets, they are really quite nice. But Dusty preferred human highways and byways, saying that such busy places were, somehow, the loneliest places of all. Dusty always had a touch of the poet himself, though his rhymes were, at best, slant.

He had just reached Miller's Cross and perched himself atop a standing stone, one leg dangling across the Anglo-Saxon inscription, when he heard the sound of human sobbing. There was no mistaking it. Though we fey are marvelous at banshee wails and the low-throbbing threnodies of ghosts, we have not the ability to give forth that half gulp, half cry that is so peculiar to humankind, along with the heaving bosom and the wetted cheek.

Straining to see through the early-morning fog, Dusty could just make out an informal procession heading down the road toward him. So he held his breath — which, of course, made him invisible, though it never works for long — and leaned forward to get a better view.

There were ten men and women in the group, six of them carrying a coffin. In front of the coffin was a priest in his somber robes, an iron cross dangling from a chain. The iron made Dusty sneeze, for he is allergic, and he became visible for a moment until he could catch his breath again. But such was the weeping and carryings-on below him, no one even noticed.

The procession stopped just beneath his perch, and Dusty gathered up his strength and leaped down, landing to the rear of the group. At the moment his feet touched the ground, the priest had — fortuitously — intoned, "Dig!" The men had set the coffin on the ground and begun. They were fast diggers, and the ground around the stone was soft from spring rains. Six men and six spades make even a deep grave easy work, though it was hardly a pretty sight, and far from the proper angles. And all the while they were digging, a plump lady in gray worsted, who looked upholstered rather than dressed, kept trying to fling herself into the hole. Only the brawny arms of her daughters on either side and the rather rigid stays of her undergarments kept her from accomplishing her gruesome task.

At last the grave was finished, and the six men lowered the coffin in

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while the priest sprinkled a few unkind words over the box, words that fell on the ears with the same thudding foreboding as the clods of earth upon the box. Then they closed the grave and dragged the weeping women down the road toward the town.

Now Dusty, being the curious sort, decided to stay. He let out his breath once the mourners had turned their backs on him, and leaped up onto his perch again. Then he began to practice his scales with renewed vigor, and had even gotten a good hold on the second portion of "Puck's Sarabande" when the moon rose. Of course, the laws of the incorporeal world being what they are, the ghost of the suicide rose, too. And that was when Dusty fell in love.

She was unlike her sisters, being petite and dark where they had been large and fair. She had two dimples, one that could be seen when she frowned and one when she smiled. Her hair was plaited with white velvet ribands and tied off with white baby's breath, which, if she had not been dead and a ghost, would certainly have been wilted by then. There was a fringe of dark hair almost obscuring the delicate arch of her eyebrows. Her winding sheet became her.

Dusty jumped down and bowed low. She was so new at being a ghost, she was startled by him. Though he is tall for an elf, he is small compared to most humans and rarely startles anyone. It is the ears, of course, that give him away. That, and the fact that, like most male feys, he is rather well endowed. The fig leaf was invented for human vanity. The solitary broad-leafed ginkgo was made for the fey. She covered her eyes with her hands, which, of course, did not help, since she could see right through her palms, bones and all.

"What are you?" she whispered. And then she added plaintively, "What am I?"

"You are dead," Dusty said. "And I am in love," foreplay being a word found in human dictionaries.

But the ghost turned from him and began to weep. "Alas," she cried, "then it was all for naught, for where is my sweet Roman?"

Dusty tried again. "I will play Roman for you. Or even Greek." He will promise anything when he is in the early throes of love.

But the ghost only wept the dry tears of the dead, crying, "Roman is the name of the man I love. Where is he?"

"Obviously alive and well and pursuing other maidens," said Dusty,

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his forthright nature getting in the way of his wooing. "For if he were dead, he would be here with you. But *I* am here."

He tried to enfold her in his arms, but she slipped away as easily as mist.

"Are you, then, dead?" she asked.

"I am of the fey," he said.

But if she listened, it was not apparent, for she continued as if answers were not a part of conversation. "He must be dead. I saw him die. It is why *I* died. To be with him."

That, of course, decided Dusty. He was always a fool for lost causes. And I must say, from my readings of history, that I knew we would all have to watch him carefully in the 1780s, the 1860s, and the 1930s, 1950s, 1970s, and 1990s.

"Tell me, gracious lady," he said, careful to speak the elfin equivalent of the Shouting Voice, which is to say, well modulated. At that level the voice could bring milk from a maiden's breast, cause graybeards to dance, and stir love in even the coldest heart.

But the suicide's ghost seemed immune. She wrung her hands into vapor, but did not step an inch closer to Dusty's outstretched arms. Sometimes the voice works, and sometimes it does not.

So, shrugging away his disappointment, Dusty tried again, this time in a more natural tone. "Start from the beginning. I may have missed something important, coming in the middle like this."

The ghost settled herself daintily some three feet above the ground, crossed her ankles prettily, and offered him her smiling dimple. "My name is . . . or was . . .oh, how *do* these things work in the afterlife?"

"Do not worry about niceties," Dusty said, patting her hand and the air beneath it at the same time. "Just begin already." I do believe it was this moment he began falling out of love. But he will never admit to that.

She sniffled angelically and pouted, showing him the other dimple. "My name is Julie. And I was in love . . . am in love . . . oh, dear!" She began to cry anew.

Dusty offered a webkerchief to her. She reached for it, and it fell between them, for, of course, she could no more touch it than Dusty could touch her. She wiped her nose, instead, on the winding sheet.

"Go on," Dusty said, blushing when she looked at him with gratitude. He often mistook such human emotions as gratitude, sympathy, and curiosity for love.

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"My own true love is Roman. It is a family name, but I like it."

"A fine name," Dusty agreed hastily, having bitten back the response that children should be named after natural things like sunshine, dust, and rainbows, not unnatures like cities, countries, and empires.

Warming to her tale, Julie the ghost began to catalog her own true love's charms, an adolescent litany of cheeks, hair, muscles, and thews that anyone but another adolescent would have found unbearable. As it was, Dusty was as busy listing Julie's charms. They were certainly a pair.

The families, it seems, were feuding. Something about a pig and a poke. Dusty never did get it straight. But the upshot was that Roman's parents would not let him marry Julie, and Julie's parents would not let her marry Roman. Such are the judicious settlements of humankind.

So the two, instead of finding a sensible solution — like moving to Verona, changing their names, or buying both sets of parents new pigs and new pokes — decided on suicide as the answer. Answer! They had not even discovered the right question.

But of course, Dusty agreed with her. Even the fey have hormonal imbalances, which is all that measures the difference between adolescent and adult.

"What you need now," Dusty said in his sensible voice, "is to reunite with your own true love."

Julie began another cascade of tears. "But that is impossible. He is alive. And I am . . . I am. . . ."

"Not alive," Dusty said, being as tactful as could be under the circumstances.

"Dead!" Julie finished unhappily, the cascade having become a torrent.

"But you thought he was dead," Dusty said.

"I found him lying in a pool of blood," she answered. "There was blood on his hands and on his face and on his coat and on his. . . ." She blushed prettily and hid her face with her hands again.

Dusty admired her sly smile through the transparent bones.

"Everywhere!" she finished.

"Did you look for a wound?" Dusty asked.

"Blood makes me urpy," she admitted.

"Urpy?" If her giddiness had not already begun to change his mind, her vocabulary certainly would. "*Urpy?*"

"You know — throw-uppins."

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He nodded, looking a bit throw-uppins himself. "So you did not look."

"No. I ran to my nurse and told her I had a headache. A very bad headache. And borrowed a powder. A very strong powder. And . . . ."

"And lay down by Roman's side, having drunk the powder in a tisane. Folding your hands over your pretty bosom and spreading your skirts about you like a scallop shell."

She made a moue. "How did you know? Did you see us?"

He sighed. "My sister told me the story. She read it in one of our father's books. His library is vast and has tomes from the past and the future as well. Only, I'd better tell you the rest. Roman is not dead."

"Not dead?" She said it with less surprise than before. "How?"

"Who knows? Animal's blood or tomato sauce or spilled wine. Who knows?"

"*Roman knows*," she said vehemently. Then she stopped. "Why are you laughing?"

How could he explain it to her? Humor is difficult enough between consenting adults. It is impossible intraspecies. Dolphins do not trade laughs with wolves, nor butterflies joke with whales. Puns have a life span half the length of a pratfall. He fell out of love abruptly. But there was still enough attraction left for him to want to help her out.

"You must convince Roman to die," he said. "Only then can he join you."

"How?"

"Haunt him."

And so the haunting began.

DUSTY WAS right, of course. Roman had already begun looking for alternatives. He had a passion for slatterns and sculleries, an interest that had apparently begun long before his dalliance with Julie. She would have been disappointed in him within the course of a normal year — that is, if she had not found him basted like a beef on a platter. Perhaps he had guessed it and had knowingly provoked her into death. If so, Dusty was right about the haunting.

But Julie forgave him, for spirits are so set in their ways. They long for what lingered last. She believed in Roman despite the evidence of her ears and eyes. It led, of course, to a spectacular single-minded haunting.

Poor Roman. He never had a chance. Whenever he was about to place

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his well-manicured hand upon a maidenly breast, Julie's ghost appeared. She sighed. She swooned. She wailed. She wept. What passion he had, fled. As did the maid to hand.

Dusty enjoyed it all enormously. He coached Julie in every nuance of necromancy: the hollow tones, the fetid breath, the call from beyond the grave. It turned out she had a genius for spirit work, a sepulchral flair. Within the week, Roman was on his knees by her grave, begging for release.

Dusty supplied a knife.

Roman ignored it.

Dusty supplied a noose.

Roman ignored it.

Dusty supplied a vial of poison.

Roman joined a monastery, gagged on the plain food, choked on the sweet wine, and longed to talk to his neighbor. He escaped less than a month later over the wall, his habit rucked up around his knees, his sandals in hand.

"Your poor hair," sighed Julie to him as he prostrated himself below the standing stone. The memory of her hand stirred the strand of golden fuzz over his tonsure.

"Give me a month to grow it back, and I will join you, my love," he said, smiling up at her. There was larceny in his smile, though she did not recognize it.

"A month I can wait," she said magnanimously. "Even two. But no more."

Dusty, sitting atop the standing stone, made a face. He might not be able to read a woman's heart, but men were no trouble to him at all.

Within the first month, Roman had converted his inheritance to cash and sailed off with a Portuguese upstart to find a brave new world, leaving Julie far behind. Ghosts, as Roman knew full well, cannot travel over water. Particularly not across a vast sea. But he could not outrun his promise. He died on a foreign shore, a poison dart between his eyes and eaten by cannibals directly after. A windspirit brought us the word. He had died messily, with Julie's name upon his lips. She liked that part.

Julie dictated her story, slightly changed, into the ear of a fine-looking poet some years later. He called her his muse, his dark lady, his spirit guide. That so impressed her, she left off haunting and took up musing with a vengeance.

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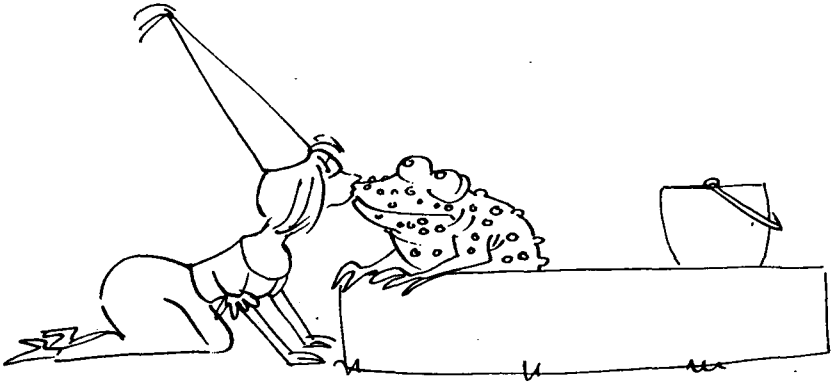
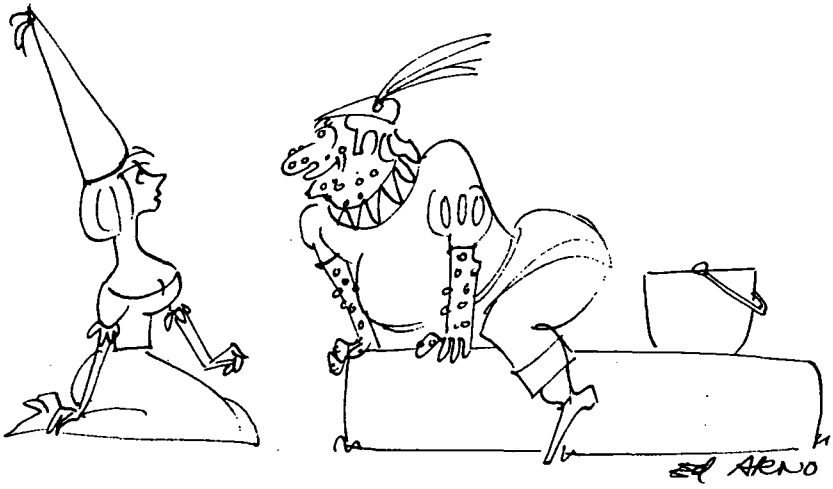
Dusty went away in disgust and found a compliant milkmaid instead, with soft hands, warm thighs, and a taste for the exotic. But that, of course, is another story and not nearly as interesting or as repeatable.





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George Zebrowski is known largely for a kind of plausible hard sf that is in short supply. He brings that talent to this quite different but utterly convincing chiller about the relationship between a psychiatrist and a patient who wakes up in all the wrong places.

Jumper

By George Zebrowski

"I GO TO SLEEP and wake up somewhere else."

She looked directly at him as she spoke, and it seemed clear that he was dealing with an unusually controlled personality. She wore an impeccably tailored tweed business suit, white blouse, blue tie, and black shoes. Her brown hair was professionally permed; her make-up was light, with almost no lipstick. He gazed at her without comment, hoping to catch a moment of weakness in her facade, but there was nothing.

"Well, Doctor, what do you think?"

He smiled. "Oh, I doubt very much that you're traveling in any way. You're already there, where you wake up, but you've dreamed that you started somewhere else. Naturally, it seems surprising to find yourself where you actually are."

"That is not the case, Doctor," she replied determinedly.

"Miss Melita, you're simply mistaking where you go to bed, nothing more."

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She grimaced, as if she'd caught him at something. "You avoid calling me by my first name, or Ms. Melita. I once went to an idiot in your profession who insisted that I use *his* first name. Do I intimidate you, Doctor?"

"Not at all. I'm not hung up on the authority of formal address. Some of my colleagues like it. Others simply want the patient to feel informal and relaxed."

"Yes, they call patients by first names but introduce themselves as Dr. so-and-so."

"I'll go by your preferences."

She stared at him without blinking, and he knew that it would be Miss Melita and Dr. Cheney. An old-fashioned female who might need rescuing from herself. The immaturity of the thought startled him, and he realized that she was having a strong unconscious effect on him.

He looked at her file on his desk. "I see that your physical checks out well, and you have no reported history of sleep disturbances."

"Doctor, I have no memory of going to the places where I wake up. I waken there and have to come home. Yesterday I woke up in my ex-lover's house. It was empty and for sale. I'm certain I was home when I fell asleep."

"These kinds of things can be very convincing," he said. "Were you wearing pajamas?"

"Of course not. I go to bed wearing clothes, just in case. I've jumped more than a dozen times in the past few months."

"What do you think it is?" he asked in his best neutral tone.

"I don't know. Movement from one place to another without covering the distance between," she replied glibly.

"A kind of quantum leap?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's a term from physics," he said. Patients sometimes like to give, or hear rational-sounding explanations. Imaginative plausibility could be a sign of delusion.

"Who cares," she said. "It happens. I know it does. The first few times were pretty embarrassing." Her tone was insistent, but she kept her composure.

"What do you think it means?"

"I sometimes feel as if I'm searching for the right place to be," she said, "but it keeps eluding me. I wake up in the wrong places."

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"Is there a right place?" he asked.

"I don't know. I can't think where it might be, but I feel strongly that it exists."

"Doesn't that give you a clue?" he asked, setting in motion his usual probing rigmarole.

"What could it tell me?"

"You may be hiding it from yourself," he said.

"I've thought of that. It may be a place I only know about, but have never visited."

"And you may not really want to go there, while at another level you do. Anyone can be of two minds, Miss Melita. I can see, whatever is going on, that this search is important to you. My job will be to keep you from deluding yourself."

"You're confident I'll take you on," she said.

"Shall we set up a schedule? I charge by the hour, five hours paid in advance."

She looked at him with skepticism. "I know you're expensive, Doctor. I'd like to set a deferred-payment plan."

He smiled at the first hint of insecurity in her voice. "Ah, but payments are part of the treatment, Miss Melita. They sow an attitude of responsibility in your unconscious, making it a partner in your recovery. You'll get better sooner."

There was a blush in her pale cheeks, suggesting that she was responding to his authority, even accepting that she might have a problem.

She stood up, as if to leave. "What a crock, Doctor. I simply don't want them to know at work that I'm seeing you, so I can't use my medical coverage. I can start paying next month, when I can draw on my savings. Anyway, you don't believe me."

She was beautiful, he noticed, slim yet womanly, standing on low heels in a dancer's graceful pose, her back slightly arched, toes out a little.

"Are you successful, Doctor?" she demanded.

"I'd like to think I am," he replied calmly.

"How long do you sleep?"

"Oh, I'd say about eight hours."

"Really successful people sleep less than five or six," she said.

She begrudges herself sleep, he noted, drives herself and others hard. Her lapses of memory were not surprising.

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"I'd say your business has leveled off," she continued, "and may even be on the way down. You're heavy into investments as a hedge against a practice that won't grow. You're doing well at them, but they have to be fed. You could go either way in the next few years."

He leaned back and smiled, trying not to think of what tax reform had done to his portfolio, determined not to show her she'd hit home.

"We're off the point, Miss Melita."

She sat down and crossed her legs. "Yes, of course. My only interest is in your competence."

Competitive chatter was a habit with her, he realized.

"I can prove to you that I jump," she said with a tremor in her voice.

"You're welcome to try," he said, "but only if I'm to be your doctor, and I'm not sure I want to take you on."

She swallowed, and he watched the muscles working in her pale throat. "Doctor, I apologize for my remarks about your business and character." She leaned forward slightly. "I don't know why this is happening to me, Doctor, but you could easily check my story. I have videotapes of me disappearing from my bed."

"Look," he said firmly, "it's just not possible for you to move yourself while you're asleep, unless you get up and convey yourself there. I know you believe you've disappeared from one location and appeared in another, but, take my word for it, it's not a true experience, not at all, never. Videotapes can be faked."

"O.K., come home with me, lock me in my bedroom, and wait. When I call you from somewhere else the next morning, you'll know it's true."

He knew than that he should not take her case. Simple neurotics made the best patients; they asked for help with life's problems and only thought they were sick. They could be made to feel helped. If this woman could imagine that she teleported from her bedroom every night, it would be nothing for her to imagine worse things. To go to her home at night would be asking for a sexual-harassment suit.

"I'll pay you six months in advance," she said, "next month."

"Can you afford it?" he asked, wondering if in fact she wanted him to come on to her.

"No, I told you it'll be my savings, but I must prove that what happens to me is real. Then I'll need you to find out why it happens. O.K., I can't be completely sure it happens unless someone like you documents it."

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He sighed, unable to decide.

"This could make your name, Doctor. You'll witness a disorder that exhibits itself in a unique way. You'll write about it, go on talk shows, bring in more patients. Hell, you might not need patients after that."

He shook his head and smiled. "I shouldn't take your money. What do you do, Miss Melita? Your entry on my form is vague."

"I'm an executive at a telecommunications company."

"Here in New York?"

"Yes. I've taken a leave of absence for six weeks."

"Are you lesbian?" he asked.

"That's not your business unless you take my case."

He leaned forward. "Do you really want help, Miss Melita?"

She sat back in her chair, uncrossed her legs, and folded her hands in her lap. "Yes, I'm lesbian, but I've had male lovers. It never works out, even though I'm attracted to some men and try hard. Not because they find out, but for other reasons. I can't be orgasmic with men. They're too threatening."

"Were you raised by both parents?"

"No, by my father. My mother died when I was small, just after we arrived in this country. My brother ran away when I was ten, and I've not seen him since."

"Is your father living?"

"Yes," she said softly.

"O.K., I'll take you on," he said. Her story had made him curious. How could a person of her obvious intelligence and good sense, who gave no sign of illness, tell such a flaky tale? "Make an appointment," he added, "for the day after you've had this experience of yours again."

"You don't want to check my story?" she asked.

"Not by sitting up all night at your place," he said, imagining the softness of her skin under her blouse.

"It's the only sure way to find out."

"Miss Melita, I'd have to ask a colleague to come with me, or hire a nurse of unquestioned integrity to serve as a witness. Maybe I'd need them both to prove that my presence was purely professional."

She bit her lower lip. "Oh, I see. But you already know I wouldn't be interested in you, Doctor."

"Do call and make an appointment, Miss Melita."

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I was dreaming about dying before I woke up in a park somewhere in Brooklyn.

As she got up and left, he realized that there would be no more to it. She'd see him a few times and then stop coming. He felt a bit lost and disappointed for the rest of the day.

When she arrived for her first appointment on the following Monday, dressed in jogging clothes, his insides leaped with naive joy at the sight of her. Gone was the executive bitch facade. The big kid who showed up in her place was much more appealing, and clearly in need of his help.

"Oh, the clothes," she said, noticing his stare. "I slept in them, so I could get home."

He looked down at his desk to hide his sudden rush of attraction for her. Her change from cool executive to willowy athlete both excited and annoyed him; he had never become this vulnerable with a patient.

"There's been a change," she said, dropping into the chair.

"What kind of change?" he asked uneasily.

"I was dreaming about dying before I woke up in a park somewhere in Brooklyn."

"A park?" he asked stupidly, watching her lips and the movement of her neck muscles. Her sweaty youthfulness was overpowering.

"I think it was a park. It was still dark when I left, so I wasn't paying much attention. Doctor, I think I'm going to die." She looked directly at him. The dismay in her eyes was crushing, but in a perverse way it only made her more beautiful.

"Nonsense," he managed to say reassuringly, but the word only seemed to reproach his own impulses. "You're just escaping from overwork. That's what these jumping dreams mean. How are things at your job? You have taken your leave, haven't you?"

"I can't take off just yet," she said pitiably. "Maybe next week."

"When was the first time you had this jumping dream?" he asked, making a mental note to check a few facts in her file.

She swallowed hard. "They're not dreams," she said softly, staring at the carpet.

"Please go on."

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"First time was when I was a girl. My father came to my room and began touching me. I was terrified. Later that night I woke up and found myself in a neighbor's house."

She did not look at him, and he knew that she was still her father's prisoner. The need to escape him had set a pattern of wish fulfillment. Any kind of pressure, even that of the workplace, still triggered the abused child's dreams of escape. Slowly, he would make her understand.

"I can help you," he said. "In time you won't have these dreams, and you'll know that's all they were. It may seem hard for you to accept that now, but you'll learn it for yourself."

A look of anger came into her face as she looked up at him. She bit her lower lip, as if confronting something within herself. "I hated him for touching me, and I hated him even more later, when I understood."

"Did you ever say anything to him?"

She shook her head, unable to speak for a moment. "He died before I could. I don't know why I lied to you about his still being alive. I'm sorry."

"That's O.K., you've repaired it."

She smiled desolately. "He got away from me, didn't he?"

"You're getting better," he said during their fifth session. "No dreams for weeks now."

She shrugged. "It's happened before. Doctor, you must come to my place and wake me before I jump again, tonight." There was no doubt in her voice. It worried him that she still refused to accept the fact that she was only dreaming of jumping.

"You don't expect me to sit at your bedside, do you?"

"I'll pay you extra, but it must be tonight."

"I can't get a nurse on such short notice."

"Then give me a release to sign, anything. I can't be alone tonight. I can feel it coming on." She took a deep breath, and her right hand shook slightly.

"Perhaps you're right," he heard himself saying. "If I can wake you up, then you'll be sure it's just a dream."

"If you can do so in time."

"What time should I arrive?" he asked.

"No later than eleven."

They sat quietly for a few moments. She stared past him, out the

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window. He tried to ignore his feelings for her, think of her only as a patient, but he couldn't shake her attraction. He wanted to hold her, kiss her gently, free her from her past. Warnings crowded into him, but he ignored them.

Her East Side apartment building was bright with lights when his cab pulled up. The architecture reminded him of egg boxes. Soft creatures called people lived in the private chambers. He felt a bit useless and infantile as he paid the driver and walked toward the glass entrance. Doubts slipped through him. How could he presume to know another's mind? They were all ever-changing labyrinths, his own included. His professional knowledge permitted nothing more than a form of organized insisting, a sublime version of parental scolding. His training was a weak imposition on a beast that was ancient and sure in its ways, always ready to overcome its displacement. It lay coiled and waiting for everyone. He was no exception.

The doorman's scrutiny made him uneasy, but finally he was in the elevator, on his way to the thirtieth floor. She was waiting for him at the door of her apartment, dressed in jogging clothes, newly laundered, by their smell.

"I'm really beat," she said as she locked the door and led him through the living room into the bedroom. "All my keys are in the safe. Here's the spare. Check the front door again, so you'll know I can't get out. Is that scientific enough for you?" The sarcasm in her voice wounded him.

"You'd have to fly to get out of here," he said, looking through the window at the East River.

"There are books by the desk," she said, getting into bed. "The light won't bother me."

She closed her eyes. He stood over her, watching her face, waiting for it to relax, but there was no change. It remained composed, oblivious to his eyes. He felt lost, on guard over a plundered fortress.

There seemed to be a lump in bed with her. He waited, then lifted the blanket slightly. She did not react. He peered under and saw that she was holding a small fluorescent light, the kind mechanics used when they worked under cars. He put back the blanket and went over to the desk.

He sat down and went through the motions of selecting a book from the small bookcase at his left. There was nothing of immediate interest.

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He sat still, listening to her gentle breathing, and began to grapple again with his feelings for her. Tenderness struggled with simple desires. It seemed that she was everything he had missed, making him feel deprived and alone. It was an old pattern with him, going back to his college days. He had considered it broken by the time he had entered medical school, yet here he was again, all but alone in a room on a Friday night, fantasizing as he had done in his freshman days.

There were some papers on her desk blotter, and he found himself looking through them to distract himself from self-pity and the thought of her in the bed behind him, warm and soft under the covers. There was an old clipping, a death notice giving the date of birth and the date of death, including the man's profession and the name of the cemetery where he was buried. The yellowing paper dropped from his fingers as he realized that he could no longer hear her breathing.

He turned around, but the desk light had affected his eyes, making the room black. He waited, then got up and went to the bed.

It was empty.

He looked around, wondering if she could have crept past him in the dark, but then he saw that the covers had not been disturbed.

He pulled them down. She was gone, and she had taken the light with her.

He rushed out into the living room and checked the front door. It was locked, and the key was still in his pocket. By all rational evidence she was still in the apartment with him — unless she had fixed the covers quietly and used another key to get out. He would have heard her.

"Katya!" he shouted, using her name for the first time.

There was no answer.

He searched the kitchen and bathroom, all the closets and under all the furniture. She was here, he told himself, wondering if he couldn't see her because he'd gone insane. She was hiding from him, attempting to convince him that her delusion was true.

"Katya, come out!" he shouted.

Finally, in the silence, he remembered the clipping and knew what he had to do.

The cab let him off in Brooklyn at 3:00 A.M. He found the cemetery park, but it took him over an hour to find the grave and start digging. His

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flashlight kept fading, but he finally uncovered the coffin. He stared at it, breathing heavily, nearly convinced that he was mad. A breeze swirled a few fall leaves around him, then subsided. He looked around to see if anyone had noticed him. He was probably too far inside the park to be seen from the street.

He drew a deep breath and started to pry open the casket with his spade. The lid wouldn't come up, then flew open with a jarring creak. Bright fluorescence shot up from inside like daylight, dazzling him.

As his eyes adjusted, he saw her. She was grasping her father's skull with both hands. The skeleton was disordered. Her eyes were wide open, staring up at him from the prison of her dead body.

She had awakened in total darkness. He saw her turning on her light and screaming in its lurid white glare as she struggled with the dead, realizing with terror that no one could help her before the air in the casket ran out. She had known where her father was buried from the old clipping, and she had jumped to this same park recently; but her conscious mind had not suspected that she would jump into the coffin, even though something had prompted her to bring the light. She had expected to find herself in another dark, empty house somewhere.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked uselessly, his voice breaking. She had told him that she was going to die. "I could have been waiting here to dig you out," he said, reaching down to touch her cheek for the first time. It was cold. Gently, he closed her eyes.

If only he could have believed her. The girl had jumped to escape molestation. The woman had cast about, seeking to confront her father, only to learn that he had died. Cheated, her unconscious had found a way to invade his final resting place and tear apart his bones. Her deepest self had also wanted to die, he realized as he imagined her screaming and choking in the earth.

"Come on, get up out of there," he said, childishly wishing that this could be only an odd rebirth ritual, of the kind prescribed by some of his wilder colleagues. His body shuddered in the cool, damp air.

Moths and insects were zeroing in on the column of light standing out from the grave. He picked up the fluorescent pack and tossed it away. What could he do? She was gone, and there was no way to prove what had happened. The police would conclude that she had been asphyxiated and brought here. If he called them now, he would be the only suspect, telling

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an utterly fantastic and unbelievable story. It would mean a trial and the end of his practice. His life would be over if he went to prison. If he left the grave open, she would be found, and sooner or later he would be questioned.

He closed the coffin, telling himself that he had committed no real crime; better if she were never found. The fluorescent light flickered on the damp grass as he climbed out and began to fill in the grave.

When he was finished, he looked around at the dark cemetery. How many sons and daughters slept with their fathers' corpses, clutched at their mothers' dry breasts, or tore at their siblings' throats? A study of case histories from the missing-persons divisions might reveal where other jumpers could be found.

She would be missed eventually, and they might come to question him; something at her office or at her apartment might tell the police that she had been his patient; but there was no reasonable chain of criminal motives or actions that would lead them to her body. She would become just another missing person.

He brushed himself clean as best he could, disposed of the two lights and spade in different waste cans, and wandered off in search of a taxi, as far from the park as possible.

The cab's radio played love songs all the way home.

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Marc Laidlaw wrote "Faust Forward," (March 1987). His new story extrapolates the idea of suspicion among "different" neighbors to its mind-stretching limits.

Middleman's Rent

By Marc Laidlaw

LISS MUST HAVE heard him coming up the ramp. She opened the front door before he knocked, and met him with a kiss that on an ordinary day would have broken his bad mood instantly. The best he could do today, though, was to take his hands out of his pockets and give her a weak hug.

"Jack, what's wrong? You look really depressed."

He nodded as she led him in. As always, her apartment was a mess: paint spattered the floor, her tools lay everywhere, and something that looked like an incomplete sculpture teetered on three spindly, twisted legs in the middle of the room.

"I finished it this morning," she said when she saw him looking at it. "Do you like it?"

"It's nice," he said. "I lost my job."

"Jack! Oh no, why?" She caught both his hands and drew him down to the cushions in one corner of the room.

He shrugged. He couldn't exactly say it was because of her, though in-

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directly that was so. In the twenty days since he and Liss had met, he'd called in sick seven times, and left work earlier and earlier each day. This morning he had come in late — having stayed up almost all last night — and Mr. Dopnitta had informed him that there was no room in the office for a laggard, no matter how well intentioned.

"I was getting tired of the job anyway," he said.

Liss sighed and got up to brew tea. "It's because of me, isn't it?"

"No! Don't be ridiculous. It was time for a change. That job doesn't suit me anymore. It's too much all of a level."

She giggled. "Jack, you didn't used to talk like that."

He felt his mood unraveling, and grinned back at her. "O.K., maybe you had something to do with it."

"I'll consider it a victory. Have you thought about what you're going to do now?"

"No. I don't have any money saved. Enough to pay my current bills, and that's it."

"You can move in with me," she said.

"There's not enough room for two in here."

"So we'll rent a bigger place. Maybe something not so fancy. I'm getting tired of these walls, you know? Wouldn't you like to find a place with a view of trees and hills? A nice country home?"

He took a long look at her walls, and had to admit that he'd grown tired of tract housing. From floor to ceiling, there was nothing to see but houses and a few little patches of community parkland. Like the wall in his room, the development was deserted most of the day, during business hours. A few tiny adults strolled on the ramps, or watched their tinier children climbing on the vines in the parks, but otherwise the neighborhood was dead.

"And how will I make money?"

"You'll think of something, Jack."

"That's easy for you to say. You've got your arts grants, but what am I? A paper pusher."

"... *Excuse me.*"

Jack turned to the wall just behind him, above the cushions, and saw an old man leaning out from the window of his house.

"Were you talking to me?" Jack said.

"Couldn't help overhearing you two," said the neighborling.

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"Have I introduced you two?" Liss asked. "I'm sorry, Ganly. This is Jack. Jack, Ganly."

"Pleasure," Jack said.

"I just thought I'd point out," Ganly said, "there's plenty you could do right in this room to earn money. I don't think most people realize. I've been independent since I was your age, and I make good money at it. Enough to retire without any help from the Equalization Board."

"Maybe stuff like that works at your level," Jack said, instantly regretting the disparagement in his tone.

"I like that!" Ganly snapped. "Here I come out with a bit of advice, and I get — well, it'll teach me to butt in."

"No, no, no!" Liss said, kneeling down by Ganly's house. "I'm sure Jack didn't mean anything. He's not used to thinking on more than three levels at a time."

"He's not even doing that!"

Liss gave Jack a withering look. He crouched down next to her.

"Uh, look, I'm sorry if that came out the wrong way. I'm sure you know what you're talking about."

Ganly stared at him a moment with a stern expression, then cocked his head and relaxed into a smile. "You listening?"

"Sure."

"Now Jack, this doesn't require thinking on more than the three levels you're used to. Just put yourself in my place for a moment, and you'll know what I mean."

Jack tried to imagine himself at Ganly's size, standing in Ganly's living room. It was easy enough. Ganly's walls were covered with little houses, just like the houses on Jack's level; and on the walls of those houses were tinier houses with tinier houses on their walls. It was simple to imagine, because if he looked out Liss's window, he could see that her house was on the wall of a large room, where Nairla and her husband lived. And Nairla's house was on the wall of a house that was on a larger wall of a larger house. . . .

"Now think of an old man like me," Ganly said. "I can't get around the way I used to, you know. Say I want to rearrange the furniture in my house, or get rid of this old table that's taking up so much space. Now for me that could be quite a chore — hard on my heart, you get me?"

Jack nodded. "Yes, sir."

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"But for you, now, it's no big deal to pry the roof off this place and move my furniture around. And if you did that for me, why shouldn't I pay you scale?"

"You mean . . . pay me what you'd pay some samesize guy?"

"Sure, why not? The work's worth it to me." Ganly tapped his forehead with a finger. "There're plenty of people would agree with that. But whoever thinks of it? Bah — they're wrapped up on their own level, that's what it is. Easier to get a desk job and talk to samesizes all day. Now for me, I'd rather get a different perspective on things — the little guy's point of view, if you know what I mean."

"That's a great idea," Jack said.

"And it works both ways. There're things you can do for the giants that they can't do for themselves, and they'll pay you handsomely to do it — because for them, it's the tiny work they have trouble with. It's worth a lot to have someone who knows his way around the inside of a radio."

"That wouldn't be me," Jack said. "I can't even load a mechanical pencil."

"Now there are a few guys," said Ganly, "who act as agents, go-betweens. They make deals not among three or five levels, but among seven, nine, eleven—"

"The Plenary Council is a chair organization," Liss said. "Its connections run upscale and down for as far as we can tell. I had a job last year working for a giant thirteen levels up. He needed someone to rearrange particles in a microscopic art exhibit. To *him* they were particles, anyway; to me it was like — well, rearranging furniture. And the same of those particles had downscale people on them, working out the most fantastic, intricate textures. . . ."

"I'm not an artist," Jack said.

"You don't need to be!" Ganly cried. "There's plenty of practical work needing to be done. And if you're thinking of moving to the country — well, farmers can always use an extra hand to dig irrigation ditches, put in fences, bring in the crops."

"What about the upscale on a farm?" Jack asked. "I'm not so sure I'd want to live with enormous bugs and rats."

"You're stuck in outphase thinking," Liss said. "It's not like that at all. We all grew up hearing stories about giant insects — houseflies that kidnap children — but it's folklore, artifacts from the race memory. Those

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are things from another dimension; they don't affect us here."

"I don't know," Ganly said. "You hear stories. . . ."

"That's all they are. Our minds are still ruled by those artifacts. It's just like you were saying, Ganly. We go on paying samesizes to do work that giants could do easily. We go on building farm machinery to do a job a giant can do with his little finger. I mean, can you believe there's still a market for tweezers when any neighborling can pick up tiny things for us? We should be living totally different kinds of lives — there should have been some sort of revolution long, long ago. But people cling to the old ways."

"They're recalcitrant, every last one of them," Ganly said. "Down to the smallest, up to the largest."

Jack said, "But if you made some kind of basic change on your level, don't you think it could have a reaction that went both ways at once? Say if one level threw out farm machinery completely and relied on giants. Don't you think those giants would get the idea and throw out their machinery? And the neighborlings of the rebel level would do likewise. Right up and down the line, you'd have a sweeping revolution. The potential's there."

"Oh, definitely," said Ganly. "The potential is infinite. The problem is people your own size. Try telling them to change their ways — to throw out their machines and hire someone from another level. It's tough! They'd rather put their money in the pocket of a samesize than a neighborling or a giant. It gets distressing."

Liss put her hands on her hips and stood up facing the wall, considering all those houses and ramps and parks. "What if I decided to paint all the houses in colors that I liked? Who'd stop me?"

"Giants would stop you," Ganly said. "Don't be ridiculous. The law applies to all levels equally."

"And what if I went out and painted on my wall, 'Giants revolt!' Or something like that, in huge letters."

"Depends on your giant. I once had a neighborling used to hang big swear words out his windows — boy, that burned me up! I had kids at the time. I couldn't touch him, though, legally. The law always protects the little guy. It took a movement of samesizes to get the guy evicted. His neighbors got upset once my kids learned the words and started shouting them at the top of their lungs."

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Liss shook her head, frowning. "Now I'm depressed. It makes me feel like . . . well, what good is this sculpture, for instance? It'll never change anything. I could throw it out the door, and to Nairla it would just be a scrap of junk to sweep up."

Ganly smiled ruefully. "Or you could take one of those pieces of scrap you chipped away and give it to me, and I could put it in my living room and call it art. Next week your scraps could be all the rage on my level."

There was a light tap on the window. Jack glanced up to see a giant finger at the glass, and beyond it an even larger eye. Liss opened the door.

"Hi, Nairla," she called. "I didn't hear you come in."

"Jack's home early?" said the giant woman. "Or did he call in sick again?"

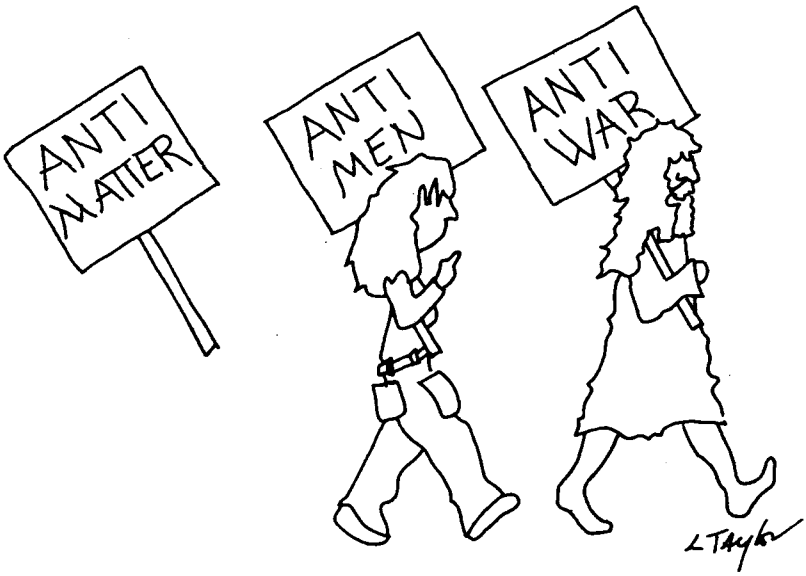
"I got fired," Jack yelled.

"Fired?" Nairla said. "Isn't that terrible? What are you going to do?"

"I'm not sure yet. Keep me in mind if you need any detail work done."

Nairla tried to hide her expression, but her face was like an immense beacon where emotions were concerned. She obviously thought him insane.

"Don't you think that's a wee bit . . . humiliating?"



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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

IRON, COLD IRON

A COUPLE OF weeks ago, I was standing in the hall at Doubleday, waiting for an elevator. I had an advance copy of my new novel, "Fantastic Voyage II," in my briefcase.

A young man, new at Doubleday, came rushing into the hall and said, "Pardon me, are you Isaac Asimov?"

I said, "That was who I was this morning. I guess I still am."

He said, "I knew you were a Doubleday author, but I didn't think I'd ever get to see you."

I said, "I hope you're not disappointed now that you have. My books are better than I am."

He said (almost inevitably, for few can resist,) "How many books have you published now?"

I thought of the fresh-minted novel in my briefcase and said, with considerable satisfaction, "Three hundred sixty-five." At this, I paused, and during the pause a gentleman entered the hall who, as it quickly turned out, did not recognize me at sight, or, possibly, had never even heard of me. I paid no attention to him, but, having paused, I then added something to my earlier remark to the young man.

I said, "I've published one book for every day in the year."

At this, the gentleman who had just stepped into the hall, smiled in a most friendly fashion at me, patted my shoulder consolingly, and said, "I'm sure there must be days every once in a while when it seems like that," and went his way cheerfully.

The young man said softly, "What does he mean, 'seems'?"

But I just laughed and said, "It's all right. Three hundred and sixty-five doesn't sound believable even to me."

In fact, this essay is the 354th I have written for *F & SF*, which means that in eleven months (always assuming no catastrophe intervenes) I will have reached the mark of one-for-each-day-in-the-year for

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this series, and that, too, won't sound particularly believable — even for me.

But I intend to shoot for it (and beyond) just the same, so here goes —

Iron was one of the metals known to the ancients, but in some ways, it doesn't measure up. Gold, silver and copper are, each in its way, beautiful, but iron is a gray and ugly metal.

Gold does not rust and retains its beauty indefinitely. Silver is almost as good, and copper isn't entirely bad. Besides, even if silver and copper tarnish and discolor, they are easily polished back to the original shine. Iron, however, rusts much more readily than the other metals do, and the rust is not only an ugly brick-red in color but it crumbles as it forms. Iron would seem to have no esthetic qualities at all.

Yet surface beauty isn't all there is. As long as iron can be kept from rusting, it is, or can be made, harder and tougher than any other metal known to the ancients. It can hold a sharper edge, and it is much more difficult to blunt.

Gold, silver and copper are far too soft to use for long-lasting tools, for tough weapons of war, for protective armor. Copper can be hardened by alloying it with tin to form bronze, and, in the early days of warfare, soldiers fought with bronze swords, bronze-tipped spears, bronze-layered shields and so on. Homer's *Iliad* is the great literary production that describes warfare in the "Bronze Age."

An iron shield, however, can hew through a bronze shield, and an iron shield will blunt and bend a bronze sword. A properly iron-equipped army can easily destroy one that is merely bronzed.

Or, as Rudyard Kipling said, in a poem he wrote in 1910:

Gold is for the mistress — silver for the maid —
Copper for the craftsman cunning at his trade
"Good!" said the Baron, sitting in his hall,
"But Iron — Cold Iron — is master of them all."

Of course, metals were rare and hard to find (the very word "metal" is from a Greek word meaning "to search for").

Yet, perhaps as long ago as 5000 B.C., it was discovered that when certain blue rocks were heated in a wood fire, beads of copper appeared. The discovery was made accidentally at first, I'm sure, but it eventually led to the deliberate search for metal ores and to the development of metallurgical techniques by about 3500 B.C.

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The metallurgical techniques first developed were insufficient to squeeze iron out of its ores so that the only iron available in the first two thousand years of metallurgy was that which was to be found already in metallic form.

Earth's supply of iron never appears in metallic form, but, fortunately, there is iron in the sky. At intervals an iron meteorite would strike the Earth, and the iron so brought down was actually a nine-to-one mixture of iron and nickel; and this alloy was harder, tougher, and more rust-resistant than iron itself. Such meteorites were searched for avidly, so that no iron meteorite from the past is ever found in places where the earliest civilizations flourished. The ancients had scavenged them all.

Isolated cases of iron smelting may have taken place as early as 3000 B.C., but the technique was not developed in a systematic way until 1500 B.C., when the Hittites in Asia Minor learned how to make use of charcoal fires to get the temperature high enough for the purpose.

The Hittites undoubtedly kept their secret for some centuries, for much the same reason that we tried to keep the nuclear bomb a secret. It was easier to keep secrets in ancient times, and the Hittites retained a monopoly on iron until 1200 B.C., when their empire was finally destroyed. Even the Hittites formed iron in only small quantities and could not field a completely iron-equipped army. Eventually the pressure of outside enemies became too much for them.

The Hittite iron workers spread out and practiced their skill elsewhere, teaching it to others, and iron weapons became more common and widespread — but still not universal.

When the Israelite tribes entered Canaan about 1200 B.C., they were uncivilized nomads who lacked the ability to form their own iron. They were amazed and daunted by the fact that the more civilized, town-dwelling Canaanites *did* have some iron. For instance: ". . .Og king of Bashan remained of the remnants of giants; behold, his bedstead was a bedstead of iron. . ." (Deuteronomy 3:11).

It was because of this that when the Israelites first entered Canaan, they spoke of the inhabitants as "giants." Later generations accepted the term literally, but it makes much more sense to suppose that the Israelites were awed by the Canaanite's iron technology. The Canaanites were giants in *that* sense.

Thus, the Israelites complained to Joshua that "all the Canaanites that dwell in the land of the valley have chariots of iron;" (Joshua 17:16).

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And when the Israelites fought Sisera in northern Canaan, "Sisera gathered together all his chariots, even nine hundred chariots of iron. . ." (Judges 4:13).

Of course, the Israelites patriotically describe themselves, under the leadership of Joshua, as victorious over the Canaanites, but this can be doubted. For at least two centuries after their appearance in Canaan, they were often under the domination of non-Israelitic groups according to the Bible itself. As late as 1000 B.C., they "served" the Philistines.

The Philistines had cold iron, you see. ". . .There was no smith found throughout all the land of Israel: for the Philistines said, Lest the Hebrews make them swords or spears: But all the Israelites went down to the Philistines, to sharpen every man his [plow]share, and his coulter, and his axe, and his mattock" (1 Samuel 13:19-20).

It was only under King David, soon after 1000 B.C., when presumably, the Israelites managed to iron-equip their army, that the Philistines were defeated and the Israelites became, for a time, a dominating force.

Again, by 1100 B.C. the Bronze Age Greeks who were the descendents of the warriors at Troy were overthrown by another tribe of Greeks from the north — the Dorians — who had iron weapons.

At that same time, the Assyrians were making use of iron weapons, too, and began to establish a large and powerful empire in what is now Iraq. Indeed by 800 B.C., the Assyrians were the first to iron-equip their army thoroughly, so that, for a while, they were unbeatable.

Eventually, iron metallurgy was developed to the point where iron and its alloys became the cheapest of metals, so that to this day we use iron and steel when we need strength and affordability. But now I will move on to another type of property which, when it was first discovered, seemed to belong to iron and iron ore exclusively.

The property might well have been noted in very early times, but it was not till about 585 B.C. that observations were recorded and the phenomenon systematically studied.

According to the story, as described in the writings of the Roman encyclopedist, Pliny (A.D. 23-79), who recorded everything he read or heard, a Greek shepherd who had iron nails in his shoes and an iron ferrule at the bottom of his staff, found that shoes and staff seemed to cling to a certain rock he encountered. It was not a universal stickiness, for nothing that was not iron stuck to the rock. The shepherd is supposed to have lived near the

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By far the most important early discovery about magnetism was made in China.

Greek city of Magnesia, located in what is now the Aegean coast of Turkey.

Samples of this sticky rock found their way to the most noted Greek scholar of the time, Thales (624 B.C.-546 B.C.), who lived in Miletus, which was about 90 miles south of Magnesia.

Thales studied the properties of what he is supposed to have called "ho magnetes lithos" ("the Magnesian stone"), and he found that it did indeed attract iron, but no other material available to him. Ever since, we call such an iron-attracting material, in English, a "magnet" from Thales' phrase, and the phenomenon is referred to as "magnetism."

The particular rock which displayed magnetic properties is a relatively uncommon oxide of iron, which is now called "magnetite." In earlier times, it was called "loadstone," or "lodestone," for reasons I will describe a bit later.

The ancients were fascinated by this mysterious and highly specific attraction. Thales thought it indicated the presence of some kind of life within the magnet, and that the attraction of iron was the result of a sort of affection between the two.

Some noticed that if a bit of iron was attracted to a magnet, that bit of iron, while in contact with the magnet, would attract a second bit of iron, which attracted a third bit of iron, and so on. Plato (427-347 B.C.) has Socrates (470-399 B.C.) refer to this and make an analogy to the way an accomplished teacher can inspire a pupil and imbue him with the enthusiasm that will enable him to inspire a pupil of his own, and so on.

There were also those who noted that, under some circumstances, magnetism exerted a repelling effect.

By far the most important early discovery concerning magnetism, however, was made in China. No one knows how it came about, but here is how I imagine it might have happened —

If someone has a sliver of loadstone, it is bound to be fun to play with. One game would be to place it on a piece of wood and float it in a tub of water. It is then free to turn in any direction and, if you have a piece of iron, you can "tease" it and make it turn toward the iron in this direction and that. I dare say that children, particularly, would consider this fun.

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Eventually, one would get tired of the game and perhaps leave the loadstone floating; then later come back and play the game again.

Eventually, some observant person was likely to notice that when the sliver of loadstone was left to itself, it always ended up aligned in a north-south direction. The magnet not only seeks iron, it would seem, but also seeks the north (or the south). There is a reference to this sort of thing in Chinese books dating as far back as A.D. 121.

The Chinese, however, as far as we know, made no practical use of this property of a magnet. It may have been used in magic shows. There is also the suggestion that when Chinese traders or soldiers made their way across vast stretches of central Asia, they made use of the magnet to give them a notion of direction, but I find that a little hard to believe.

They seem definitely not to have used it at sea. For the most part, the Chinese were not great sea travellers. Self-satisfied to a fault, they felt that they had the only part of Earth worth anything and tended to stay at home.

They did make reference to the use of magnets for finding direction at sea as early as 1086, but the reference then was to foreign sailors, presumably from what is now Indonesia.

At just about that time, an English scholar, Alexander Neckham (1157-1217), made the first European reference to the use of magnetism to find direction at sea. How the news spread from China to western Europe, we don't know. It is conceivable, I suppose, that the discovery was made in Europe independently, but we don't know about that, either.

Prior to 1200 or so, sea voyagers got their best idea of direction by observing the Sun at midday, when it was always in a due southerly direction. At night, they observed the North Star, which was always due north. Then, too, the Sun rose in the east and set in the west, and that was useful too. Once you know one direction, you know all the others.

The trouble with this, though, is that many days and nights are cloudy. The Sun and stars are then not seen and direction finding breaks down. As a result, sailors rarely dared get far out of sight of land, lest they be unable to find their way back and so perish.

But suppose you pivoted a loadstone sliver on a horizontal card so that it was free to turn in any direction around the card. It should eventually come to a halt in the north-south direction, with one end, distinguished by a touch of paint, perhaps, pointing north.

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The word "load" is an archaic term for way, or route, or direction of journey. Therefore, anything that revealed the proper direction could be given that word. The North Star was sometimes called the "loadstar," and that is why the magnetic rock came to be known as "loadstone."

The word "compass" comes from a Latin term meaning "to measure around a circle." That is why the device geometers use to mark off a circle is called a "compass." In the same way, the card with the pivoting needle able to go around in any direction is also called a "compass." To distinguish the two compasses, the one using the loadstone is a "magnetic compass."

The magnetic compass, as used in its early centuries, was crude, but it worked. It made it possible to move away from the coast and venture into the open sea, for now one could determine directions be it ever so cloudy, and there was a sharply reduced fear of getting lost and being unable to return to land.

To be sure, a magnetic compass is not an absolute necessity for sea travel. About the time the compass came into use in European vessels, the Polynesians were moving all over the vast Pacific Ocean in open, primitive vessels, with nothing but Sun, stars, currents and bird flights to help make their way between the tiny dots of land that were scattered widely over the sea.

Nevertheless, the Polynesian feat was a difficult one that was just barely managed, and that was sure to leave them stranded on particular islands for long periods of time. The west Europeans, *with* the compass, began, soon after 1400, to move across the seas and to begin an "Age of Exploration" that, for a period of time, allowed a few small nations—Portugal, Spain, England, France, the Netherlands—to dominate the world. All because of the compass—and gunpowder.

The first person to study magnetism with something like modern thoroughness was a French scholar whom we know only as Petrus Peregrinus ("Peter, the Pilgrim"). He was born about 1240, and we don't know when he died. He was an engineer in the army of the French king, Louis IX, and, in 1269, while he was engaged in the dull and long-drawn-out siege of an Italian city, he wrote a letter to a friend in which he described his experiments with magnets.

Peregrinus showed that the magnetic properties of a magnet were concentrated at the ends, or "poles." He was the first to call them this, and we still speak of them as such, sometimes specifying them as "magnetic poles" to differentiate them from "geographic poles" that come

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at the two ends of an axis of rotation.

He showed further that it was always the same pole that pointed toward the north, so that one could speak of a north magnetic pole and a south magnetic pole. (He apparently failed to notice, however, that the north magnetic pole of one magnet attracted the south magnetic pole of another, but that two north magnetic poles or two south magnetic poles repelled each other.)

Peregrinus also showed that it was impossible to isolate one of the poles from the other. Both always existed on a given magnet. If a magnetic sliver was broken in two, the half with a north magnetic pole developed a south magnetic pole at its broken end; the half with a south magnetic pole developed a north magnetic pole at its broken end.

He was also the first to study the behavior of iron filings when shaken on a card underneath which a magnet existed. From this he deduced the presence of what we now call a "magnetic field."

In addition, he was the first to suggest that a ship's compass not be pivoted on a mere unmarked card but one on which the various directions were marked. (He also had the erroneous notion that the needle would slowly work its way around the card in 24 hours, matching the rotation of the Earth, so that the compass could be used as a clock.)

It is possible to get the exact direction of north without a compass. When the Sun moves about the sky from east to west, it crosses the north-south line when it is at its highest point. It is then (at least when viewed from the northern hemisphere) due south.

This can be followed more easily by observing the shadow of a stick hammered vertically into the ground. As the shadow swings about from west to east, it grows from long to short to long again. When the shadow is at its shortest, it is pointing directly north. One can also mark the line of the shadow at sunrise and again at sunset. The angular bisector of the angle thus formed will point due north. Then, too, the position of the North Star, if averaged over different times of the night and the year, also gives you the true north.

It is possible, then, to note that the position of north indicated by a magnetic compass often deviates somewhat from the true north. Chinese observers made note of this now and then, even as early as the 700's. However, these were isolated observations and nothing came of them. In Europe, too, there might have been isolated notices of this deviation of the compass from the

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true north—something called "magnetic declination."

Magnetic declination was first studied systematically by Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) on the occasion of his famous voyage of discovery in 1492. Not only did Columbus discover America, but his was the first voyage we know of that yielded important scientific information beyond the mere fact of geographic discoveries. After all, Columbus was more than a dreamer and a brave man; he was a skilled navigator and he had the kind of credentials that allowed him, for his time, the status of "scientist."

Columbus noted that the direction of magnetic north not only deviated from the true north, but that the extent and the direction of the deviation varied as he travelled. The compass slowly turned from pointing a bit west of north to pointing a bit east of north, and somewhere in mid-ocean he passed a line where the magnet did, for a time, indicate the true north.

He made careful observation of this but kept it secret. He had a hard job keeping his sailors to the task of sailing ever westward, and if they had found out that the compass wasn't telling them the truth, they would undoubtedly have panicked, mutinied, killed Columbus and headed back east in a desperate desire to regain land before they were lost forever. And without Columbus's firm hand on the controls, they are not likely ever to have made it.

If that had happened, Columbus would have set out from Spain and would simply have disappeared. Who knows, then, when another explorer might have been mad enough to try the same voyage, especially as five years after Columbus's discovery, the Portuguese *really* reached India by going around Africa.

Compasses are always pivoted so that they can swing only clockwise and counterclockwise in a plane parallel to the surface of the Earth. What if they are pivoted in such a way that they are fixed in the horizontal and can't move right or left, but *can* move up and down. In that case, the north magnetic pole dips downward to some degree toward the Earth's surface. This is called "magnetic dip."

It may be that the first person to note this was a German vicar named Georg Hartmann. In 1544, he observed magnetic dip and wrote a letter on the subject, but it aroused no interest.

In 1576, an English navigator, Robert Norman (born about 1560, with the date of his death unknown), also made note of magnetic dip and this time the discovery made its mark.

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Meanwhile, while all this was going on, it was only natural that people would wonder *why* a compass always insisted on pointing north. How did the compass know which direction north was?

Since it was known that a compass would point in the direction of a lump of iron because of the attraction between itself and the iron, why not suppose, then, that somewhere far in the north there was a really *huge* lump of loadstone, a whole vast mountain of it, and that that was what the compass was pointing to?

The first to suggest that such a mountain existed was Pliny, who told the story of the discovery of magnetism. He not only suggested a mountain but two such mountains, one of which attracted iron, while the other repelled it. He placed these mountains off the coast of India which, at that time, was considered the home of all marvels.

A century later, the Greek astronomer Claudius Ptolemy (A.D. 100-170) reduced matters to an attracting mountain only, and placed it farther off, on the southern coast of China. However, he imagined the magnetic pull to be so strong that ships with iron nails were pulled forcibly to the mountain if they approached too closely and were held there forever. In the Middle Ages, the story was that the mountain pulled the iron nails out of the ship, reducing it to isolated planks. Everyone on the ship was then plunged into the sea and drowned.

In *The Thousand and One Nights*, the ship of Sinbad the Sailor, in one of his voyages, does venture too near the magnetic mountain and is shipwrecked as a result.

Of course, once the Europeans began to explore the seas it was clear that no such mountain existed in any part of the known world. It would have to be far up north amid the polar ice, in any case, if the compass pointed to it.

That would account for magnetic dip because the compass would point straight at the mountain through the bulge of the spherical Earth. It would also account for the existence of magnetic declination if the magnetic mountain were not precisely at the north pole.

However, as the 1500's progressed, Arctic exploration showed no signs of the nearness of a magnetic mountain, and as the fact that magnetic declination changed with time became better understood, that gave rise to the puzzle that the magnetic mountain would have to be drifting.

The time was ripe for new insights, and that's for next month.

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Elizabeth Engstrom is a writer who is new to us, but on the evidence of the story below, it would be worth searching for her work. It includes two novels, WHEN DARKNESS LOVES US (Morrow) and BLACK AMBROSIA (Tor). Her first F&SF story is an unusual and moving tale about a homeless man and a startling and pleasant addition to his life.

FOGARTY & FOGARTY

By Elizabeth Engstrom

Chapter 1

FOGARTY FIRST MET HIS bride in a culvert under the highway one night during a full moon. He was cold and tired, and a little anxious about being caught too far from home when the cold snap bit. He wasn't happy about taking refuge out in the open, either, where who-knows-what might come along and get frisky with an old man so casually dressed.

He found some old papers and leaves piled up in the corner where the wind had swept them, and he wound his way through the culvert, shuffling his feet, scooping up more and more to add to the pile. When he'd built himself a fair little heap where it was dry and out of the wind, he stepped gently across it to the concrete corner and sat down, then fluffed the leaves up around him.

The old autumn smell of the leaves was a pleasant change from the

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scent of his normal home, and he breathed in their acrid mustiness. He knew they would make him sneeze, but he couldn't help himself; he was suddenly very pleased that events had taken such a turn as this. He'd forgotten about autumn leaves.

When finally the sneeze did come, it came from deep down inside him, and his eyes opened wide as he felt it coming up, and he smiled in anticipation. Then his vision was blurred by a rush of tears, his eyes squinted up, and a blast shot through him that felt so good that he laughed out loud.

Fogarty wiped his nose on his shirt sleeve and saw that he'd sneezed almost all of the leaves off himself, so he began to gather them close again, chuckling to himself, feeling cozy in his new home.

In the midst of chuckling and gathering old crispy leaves and remembering that sneeze, he had the creepy feeling that someone was watching him. Fear jumped into his stomach, and he stopped. He held perfectly still. The night was so silent, he could hear one leaf on his neck rub another in perfect rhythm with his racing pulse.

Then he heard leaves crunch. A step. And another, and finally a woman came into view, an old, frail woman, with a man's gray overcoat on, and some leather boots with good miles still in them, and socks and socks and more socks all up and down her legs. She wore a knit cap over a scarf, and she stepped gently on the leaves, warily walking around him, giving him lots of room.

Fogarty was stunned. There were indeed blessings on this night. First, autumn leaves. Then a sneeze to top all sneezes. And now, company. In the form of a lady, yet.

Look at ya, Fogarty, he thought. A lady. Where's yer manners?

He jumped up. Leaves flew from him as if he'd exploded. The woman's face reacted with horror. He realized what a sight he must make, and immediately dropped to one knee.

"My dear," he said, and stopped her, mid-bolt. "I dint mean to startle ya. I was just lookin' fer my manners here." Her face softened, though she took a step back. "It's a cold night, and I been caught too far from my home; might I guess you is in the same?"

She said nothing.

"The night's full of blessings, it is," he said. "First, these leaves — ain't they glorious? And I think they're gonna be warm, too; and then a sneeze, and now some company."

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She looked at him with an expression of interest, but still said nothing.

"Would you join me?" He stood up and shook out his aching knee, but held the palms of his hands out to her, so she wouldn't be afraid. "I'm Fogarty."

"Fogarty," she said.

"That's right!" He smiled, and wished he'd found a bath before now. "Fogarty. What's your name?"

She was silent.

"I bet it's a name as beautiful as yerself," he said, beginning to shiver, "but it's mighty cold here, and I'm going to get back down inside this blanket of leaves for some warmth. I would courteously invite you to join me. I can see as you're cold, too." He sat back down and began piling leaves up on his legs and his chest, moving slowly so as not to spook her.

"I don't normally live around here," he said, feeling her interest. She wanted to join him, he could tell. "I normally live way down South. Out of town. You live around here?"

She kept her silence, but took a step closer to him.

"Here," he said, and swept some leaves from the concrete. Then he sprinkled a soft bedding down. "Sit down here, and I'll cover you up nice and warm."

She came over timidly, sideways, ready to run at his first false move. He held his breath — he wanted to have some company on this cold and lonely night — and gently smiled at her and encouraged her. Eventually she sat in the spot he cleared, but as he moved to put leaves on her legs, she scooted over farther away from him.

He held up his hands. "O.K.," he said. "You do it."

She picked up a handful of leaves and put them on her lap, then looked back at him. He nodded in encouragement, and scooped armfuls up around his own legs, then nodded at her. She copied his motions, and soon she was grinning and up to her chin in leaves.

They sat together in silence for a while, listening to the sporadic traffic on the highway overhead, the rumblings, mostly, of the sixteen-wheelers. Then Fogarty saw a lightening of the sky, and he shook his arm free of leaves and pointed at it.

"Moon's about to come up," he said. "Another blessing." And she smiled at him, and they waited for it together.

When finally the moon, gigantic and orange, arose over the skyline, it

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cast a bright, colorless light on the culvert, deepening sharp-edged shadows. Fogarty smiled and sighed, and turned to the woman to speak, but the moonlight on her soft face and bright eyes caught him off guard, and the breath caught in his chest. A lady, he thought. A real lady.

Leaves crinkled as she reached up and pulled off her knit cap, and then untied the scarf from under her chin. Her hair wasn't as gray as he thought it would be; it was fairly dark, and curly. She ran her fingers through it, fluffing it up a little bit, and the moon caught the highlights, and she smiled at Fogarty, and the little wrinkles around her eyes threw nets around his heart, and he fell in love.

He gazed at her and gazed at her, until the moon arose above the highway. The dark shadow sliced across the culvert and left them again in the dark.

Fogarty felt her presence as rich as if it were liquid. He was mindful of his heart pounding, his breath rasping through dry lips, and he was mindful of his clothes and his beard, and he reached up a hand through the leaves and smoothed down his own thinning hair.

The feeling was vaguely familiar, this feeling of warmth and excitement that jittered his stomach and spread until he could hardly sit still. Fogarty searched his fragmented memory, but found only the unsettling feeling that there had been a woman in his life once, a woman and a child — a son — but those thoughts were uncomfortable somehow, and he didn't dwell on them. It was just this first flush of love that dredged stuff up, he thought, and he ran his hand over his face and finger-brushed his front teeth real quick, and then snaked his hand back under the leaves and began to pick at a hangnail.

"Where do you mostly live?" he asked.

No answer.

He turned to look at her, and there was a sparkle in her eye that must have captured all the starlight, and the streetlights, and headlights from passing sixteen-wheelers as well as the blue neon from the diner two blocks down, and focused it into two little tiny pinpoints that beamed right into Fogarty.

He was mesmerized by those eyes — eyes he couldn't really see in the dark; he could see only the little pinpoints of light — they seemed to be looking right through him, right into his soul.

He looked for a minute into his own soul, and found it to be a good

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one. A worthy one. A clean one. Cleaner, at least, than the outside of him.

"I would please to know your name," Fogarty whispered, and just then the moon peeked down from between the two highway overpasses, and a swath of light fell on the concrete over her head and began sliding down. Their eyes locked, and then the moon began with her hair, showing every detail; and then her eyebrows, and her eyes — those glorious eyes; were they brown? — and then her nose, nice and straight; and full cheeks, then mouth with wide smile and deep laugh lines. Up to her neck in leaves, it looked to Fogarty as if a heavenly sculptor had been interrupted just as he finished the face of an angel.

The moonlight moved across the space between them, and up Fogarty's mound of leaves, and he could almost feel the light as she followed it with her eyes, up over his collar, to his loose neck; the beard stubble from his two-day trek from home; his small lips and hooked nose; deep, recessed eyes that sometimes looked green, sometimes brown; and big, bushy eyebrows that looked like they ought to be on a man with a little more meat on him. He had a shock of hair right in the front, but then it thinned out to be a pretty poor crop, but had some good growth in the back. He kept it fairly trimmed; usually he kept a pretty good toilet. It was just because he'd been caught away from home two nights in a row now. . . .

"Fogarty," she said, in a whisper as soft as a spider moving across a web.

"Fogarty," he whispered back, aching to hear his name again on her lips. No one had ever said it like that before. "Fogarty. That's me. What's yours?"

"Fogarty," she said again, and smiled, and her teeth were good and straight, and then the leaves rattled, and her hand emerged from the pile, clean and as white as a lily.

"I been a good man, Lord," Fogarty said to the moon, and he reached his spotted hand out and touched hers. Her hand was warm and soft, and he said to her, "Yes, the moon has seen to bless us tonight."

"Bless us," she whispered. "Fogarty and Fogarty."

Fogarty's mouth dropped open, and he looked deeply into her eyes, and knew that his dream had come true. A dream he hadn't even known he'd had.

He saw the shadow begin to take the moonlight from the top of the culvert over her head, moving down toward her, and he knew this was his chance. He must rise to the occasion.

"You, Moon!" he said. "You and the Lord bless us, O.K.? Fogarty and

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Fogarty." Then he laughed and she laughed, and they squeezed each other's hands, and then the moon, on track to its zenith, slid right on past, leaving them in the shadows of the overpass, listening to sixteen-wheelers and the music in their own hearts.

Chapter 2

THE NEXT morning, long before the sun could warm their leaves, Fogarty and his bride awakened to the sound of rush-hour traffic over their heads. They smiled at each other with a tug of embarrassment that the rational light of day often brings, and Fogarty let go of the soft hand that had held his all night long.

"Oh, such a blessing to be up before the sun," he said, and stood up, gave a mighty stretch, then shook all the leaves out of his clothes. Suddenly he found himself shy. When the sun came up, he and his new wife would have their first real look at each other. No, he said to himself, that's not true. The moon showed our souls last night, and that's enough.

"Come, Fogarty," he said, and held out his hand for her, then pulled her up. She, too, stretched and grinned, then dusted off her clothes, pulling pieces of dried leaves out of her multilayered socks. He took her hand, and they climbed out of the culvert and walked into the city.

"Do you have clothes?"

She looked down at what she was wearing.

"Or belongings? Something to fetch?"

She lifted his hand to her cheek.

"Well, then," Fogarty said, with a blush and a feeling of manly protectiveness. "Let's go home."

Hand in hand, they walked through the center of the city as if it belonged to them, Fogarty and Fogarty, and for once, no one hassled them. They walked through the center of the business district, and as the secretaries and executives sped by them with their clackety high heels and brisk swinging of briefcases, Fogarty held onto his bride a little tighter, and they both walked a little taller, and when they reached the area of used-car lots and giant discount stores, both breathed a little easier.

The sun cast long afternoon shadows when they reached the far side of town. Fogarty tugged his wife's arm, guiding her down an alley. The wonderful scent of freshly cooked vegetables almost made him weak in the

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knees. "Come, Fogarty," he said. "Meet a friend."

Fogarty stopped at a green back door where at least a dozen cats were blinking their sleepy eyes in the dusk and waiting for a handout. He smoothed his hair back, brushed at his clothes, ran his hand over his face, and finger-brushed his front teeth. Then he straightened his bride's hat and touched her cheek and knocked on the door.

After a minute the door opened, and a little Chinese man stood with the bright light behind him.

"Fogarty!" he said, and his eyes squinted up with pleasure. "Long time. Come in, come in. You hungry?"

Fogarty looked at his wife and smiled, and she looked back at him with adoration.

"Who's this?" The man in the white coat looked the missus up and down, suspicion narrowing his face. "Fogarty, I thought. . . ."

"Fogarty," she whispered, and Fogarty put his arm around her.

"Fogarty and Fogarty," he said to the Chinaman. "The moon has married us."

"Married?" The cook's expression opened up. "Married?" Delight opened his arms wide, and the door opened wide, and he hugged and kissed them both. "Come in, come in," he said. "Marriage feast."

Fogarty led the way to the little wooden table and chairs set in the middle of the Chinese kitchen. He pulled one out, but his bride's eyes looked around wildly. "Would you like to freshen yerself?" he asked. She looked at him without understanding, so he guided her to the rest room. She went in and closed the door.

Lee returned with his wife, whose name Fogarty could never pronounce, so he called her Donna, which always made her laugh gently behind her hand. Donna was big with child, and Lee big with pride.

Fogarty stood up when his missus returned, and she picked her hat shyly as he introduced her, and Donna touched both shoulders and made her sit down, and Donna and her husband served them more than they could eat in a week.

"I work here sometimes," Fogarty explained. "I stop here coming home, and eat and sleep, and then I clean."

"He does a good job. He's a good man," Lee said.

"Yes," Donna said. "We like Fogarty. Good man."

Fogarty blushed.

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"Sleep here tonight, and in the morning we'll pack your honeymoon food, and you'll go on home. You're going to live at Fogarty's?"

All eyes went to Fogarty's bride, who looked at her plate.

"I must work . . . ," Fogarty said.

Lee shook his head. "Wedding present," he said, and Fogarty and Fogarty spent their second night together on futons in the storeroom while a busy restaurant went on around them.

In the morning there were two white paper sacks on the counter, each filled with little white cartons of food, and Fogarty and Fogarty each took one and started home.

Fogarty was feeling more and more comfortable in her presence, and was glad the good Lord found him fit to receive a good woman. He didn't know what he'd do if he'd gotten a bad one. This one was pretty as a picture and modest and shy, nice and gentle. She needed a bath, though, and some fresh clothes. There was time for all of that when they got home.

Outskirt buildings fell behind them as they walked the asphalt in the early morning. A few shacks came and went, and they were beginning to see a few silos in the distance, when Fogarty steered his bride down a rutted, packed dirt road to the right. They followed along, crossed the railroad tracks, and kept going.

"It'll be a blessing to get home early," he said.

She smiled up at him, then looked back down at the road, shifting her bundle of Chinese food.

"It's not far now."

The road curved off to the left, but Fogarty led her down a footpath in the knee-high yellow weeds. Then he held the wires of a fence apart for her, and followed her through. They went to the right and followed the fence for twenty-seven fence posts, and the trail turned left again.

"Landfill," he said. "Been my home now for eight, coming on nine winters. You'll like it."

He smiled, but she failed to look up at him, and suddenly he was overcome with uncertainty. He walked a few more steps through the litter-strewn weeds on the uneven ground. His stomach was jumping around inside his belly, and it felt a lot like shame. "Hey, Fogarty," he said, and touched her arm. She stopped and looked at him, and he saw that soft face and those fabulous brown — they were brown; they were wonderfully brown — eyes. "Hey, I'm pleased to be taking you to my home." A smile

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flitted across her face, and she looked down again. She's nervous, too, he thought.

He pointed out landmarks to her, for when she went foraging, or if she ever needed to go to town. "My house is hard to find, you see; that's why it's been here eight, going on nine winters. Just keep seein' old Mr. Boiler's pipe sticking up over there, and the three cars piled on top of each other over there. The front door's right in the middle."

They went up over hills and slid down into the valleys as the terrain of the dump became more difficult. "They dump the fresh stuff more'n a mile off," he said. "Sometimes it smells, and sometimes there's a fire. Then I *really* smell it. This part of the landfill's done, though, so they leave it alone. Ha. Eight, almost nine winters now."

The sight of Fogarty's front yard made him happy enough to want to hoot, but he didn't want to scare the lady, so he just said, "Here we are," and walked right up to the front door that used to belong to an old blue Pontiac, and opened it.

She looked inside, which was dark, and she took a step back and shook her head. Fogarty looked inside, down the dark stairs, and said, "You're right; I forget. You stay here, and I'll put in the light."

He walked away from her, around toward the old boiler, and shifted some pieces of wallboard and siding. Light shone up the stairs. Then he walked around in a big circle, moving sheets of warped plywood and roofing paper, and more and more light came up from below.

He was sweating in the late-morning heat when he came back. "Skylights," he said. "I cover 'em when I go away. Come, Fogarty." And he ducked down inside the door and went down to the bottom of the stairs, where he waited for her.

She followed, hesitantly, and when she got down, Fogarty took her hand, put his arm around her, and looked into those deep, trusting brown eyes and said, "This is our home." He delighted in seeing the astonishment on her face as she looked around. "Aren't we blessed?"

Fogarty had spent eight, going on nine winters carving out a very personal space amid the debris. The ceilings were made of a patchwork of woods and old windows, propped up in crucial points by timbers that had seen better days, but never a prouder use. The walls and the floors were as colorful and kaleidoscopic as the rest of the place, a swirling interconnecting of color and form and texture. Each individual piece had been

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foraged from the dump, but there was no garbage, no junk. Everything had been used and no longer wanted by its original owner, but Fogarty had seen through stains and holes and rust and found the nuggets of usefulness in another's trash.

The kitchen had a tiny woodburning stove, a Formica counter, and cabinets.

"Lee give me those," he said, and walked around her to touch a row of white dish towels that hung on a rod over the sink. He felt a need to break the silence, put some animation into his home. He set down his white sack of Chinese food and took hers from her. Then he took off his coat and emptied the big pockets he'd sewn into the lining. He brought out a tall bottle of lamp oil, a dozen books of matches, two handfuls of warped candles, and some dented cans of meat and fruit.

He looked around at his home and was pleased that he had tidied up before leaving on this last trip. He hadn't known he would be bringing home a wife.

"Come, Fogarty," he said, and took her hand. They moved past the kitchen, past the little plastic-topped dining table with two chairs, into the living room that had a sofa, a rocking chair with footstool, a scarred coffee table with a game of solitaire laid out and ready to play, and a whole corner filled with stacks of puzzles and games. A magazine rack held some old issues of *National Geographic*, and next to it was a big kerosene lantern on an end table.

Fogarty looked at his bride's face, but her expression of astonishment hadn't changed. His pride swelled into a smile.

"Come," he said again, and led her through a yellow gingham curtain into his bedroom. Both pillows were neatly plumped on a high double bed; an old quilt that looked handmade was folded neatly at the foot; a plain wooden dresser stood in the corner, and over it hung a mirror. A chunk of galvanized pipe hung from the ceiling, and clothes, neatly arranged on hangers, hung from it. "My apologies for that," he said. "A proper closet is next." The missus looked at him with wide eyes and a cocked head, and finally she began to smile.

"The bathroom's over here," he said, and took her gently out of the bedroom, past a blue-and-white-striped curtain, where a plastic shower stall stood over a drain in the floor, and a stepladder was propped up next to it.

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"The water heats up on the woodstove," he said, and it goes up in that there bucket. Then" — he opened the shower curtain — "I can stop and start the water here with this hose, so's I can wet down and soap up and then rinse off." A plastic sack of little hotel-sized bars of soap hung in the corner.

A sparkling-clean blue antique chamber pot had been set under a straight-backed chair that had the cane seating removed. "I use that," he said, "and empty it every day, but we can do something else, if you want."

Her eyes softened.

"There's a faucet just on the other side of that old boiler outside," Fogarty said. "It's such a blessing, it is. A picnic table used to live there, too — I guess the workers used to eat there, and they put in a faucet and left it when they moved on to the north side. I been meaning to run a hose, but I don't want anybody to be finding the house, so I just go up and get water when I need it."

He got another noseful of her in his close quarters, and realized that they needed some shower water right now. "I'll go get some now," he said, "and put on some tea and make us both a shower."

She just looked at him, and that jittery feeling returned to his belly. He didn't know if she understood anything he said or not.

"I light the stove only at night, usually, when nobody can see the smoke, but a hot shower and cup of tea is such a blessing when I first come home. I'll just do a little fire, just enough for baths."

He paused, anxious to get his chores done, but hardly able to move away from her. "There's clothes in that box over there; they're men's clothes, but they'll do until we can find you some fresh ones and get yours laundered."

He ran out of words, and they stood together in the hallway, close, and Fogarty saw again what pretty hair she had peeking out from under that brown knitted hat, and what a soft face she had, and for some reason it didn't seem odd at all that she was here. After eight, going on nine winters living in this place all by himself, suddenly it was almost like he'd had her in mind all along as he worked every day on his little house, making it just right for her. And now here she was, and it felt normal and natural.

"So why don't you just . . . sit . . . and I'll get the water on and . . . so why don't you just sit . . . there?"

She smiled, and he smiled back, and then he worked over the stove

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until he got a little fire going, put the pot on it, and went out with his biggest bucket. It would take at least two trips, he thought, but when he came back with the first bucketful, he found her asleep on his bed, her hat and coat still on, a warm flush on her cheeks.

"Such a blessing you are, Fogarty," he said to her, and went to take himself a shower.

Chapter 3

FOGARTY SNAPPED awake, his body rigid with fear. Then he heard her soft breathing in the silent night, and he relaxed. So strange to have someone else with him. In his bed. He looked at his bedside clock: 5:30. He looked over at her, a lump under the quilt, barely visible in the starlit darkness, and he could see shine on the little bit of curly hair that rested on the pillow.

Married you are, Fogarty; and he smiled up at the skylight. Married.

A vision of mounds and mounds of festively wrapped gifts swam up before his watery eyes.

His heart thudded. A gift! I must be giving my bride a wedding gift! He slipped out of bed and put on clothes that were clean as of the day before. He left her sleeping and walked quietly up the stairs and out into the early-morning chill.

He gave a mighty stretch and a yawn, then rubbed his arms in the cold. The morning stars winked down on him as he saw the first faint glow of false dawn in the east. East. That's where he would find a present for his wife. In the east.

He walked past the old rusted boiler, and gave it a little pat, hearing the hollow sound of its deep interior. Again, as always, his mind played on it for a few minutes. That big old boiler was big as a house, almost. It had a big use in it, just waiting to be discovered; he knew that. Maybe he needed to spend a few hours with it, just the two of them alone, and he could feel what the old thing was about, feel what it wanted to do with the time it had left as an old boiler before the rust turned it into something else. It was real big, and good, and mostly dry inside. He would spend some time with Mr. Boiler soon.

Fogarty walked on past the boiler, toward the lightening sky. He walked up and down the hills of trash, through the areas he knew by heart.

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He'd picked over all this place long, long ago, and while the landscape always shifted, changing with the winds above and the decaying below, the substance never really altered.

Dawn grew brighter, and the orange glow spread horizontally. Fogarty stopped for a moment to just watch as the clouds in the sky caught fire, and then he caught his breath as the surface of the debris of the dump turned yellow/orange for miles in front of him. He wheeled around, and, sure enough, the stars still held their ground in the west, waiting until the last minute before fading out.

Fogarty found an old, dented suitcase half buried under some plastic bags full of some rotted something — old weeds, probably — and he pulled it free and sat down on it to watch the sun make her appearance. He sat and watched, seeing patterns in the clouds, luxuriating in the richness of the colors spread before him. Dawn was his favorite time. It meant newness to Fogarty, freshness. Dawn always tugged on something deep within him, making him think about his life, and how good it was. He always had enough of whatever he needed. He picked up cans and old bottles whenever he went foraging, and when he ran out of oil for the lantern, he went into town to the place that gave him money for his pickings. He grew his own vegetables, year after year, using seed from the previous year's harvest. He found lots of burnable things for his stove, so he was warm in the winter, and there were plenty of clothes, and he had the company of the birds and boiler, and the sun, and now and then a meal and some work with Lee and Donna.

And now he had Fogarty, his wife. What a blessing she was.

The sky began to turn blue, and shadows formed on the hills and debris in front of him, making strange patterns of light, all still with a reddish glow. He laughed aloud at the idea that he could make animals out of these shadows as easily as he made animals out of the clouds. And these changed as fast as the clouds, too, turning into something different every few seconds.

Ah yes, Fogarty, he thought, plenty of blessings right here. He had everything. He had his mornings, and his quiet time, and his sunrise, and this old suitcase to sit upon as he thought about things, and he had a long life, and good teeth, and . . . he looked around. He would like to have an orange tree. He would like to grow fresh oranges.

He watched the sunrise turn to yellow, and he thought of ripping deep

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into a rich, juicy orange, and the ache began behind his ears, and his mouth began to water. Maybe I can grow an orange tree inside that boiler, he thought, and then I can just go up there and say, "Hello, Mr. Boiler. I've come to thank you and your orange tree by having myself a little orange breakfast; yes, I did; thank you very much," and I'd peel myself a big, fat orange and let the juice run down my hands. Yes, he thought, that's just what I need.

He bounced up and down a little on the old, dented suitcase as the sun sent glory to surround the eastern sky, and Fogarty tasted orange juice in his mind. The suitcase made a funny noise as it dented in and out, and he laughed out loud and did it some more. Then he stood up and took a look at it.

"Hey, Mr. Suitcase," he said. "You're a good old chair. You're a good old sunrise chair." And he laughed until he saw a piece of fabric sticking out the side, caught when the suitcase had been closed. It was dirty and faded, but it had flowers on it, and, intrigued, Fogarty stood up and picked up the suitcase and looked closer at the fabric.

Maybe Fogarty would like that, he thought, and he snapped up the suitcase clasps. He opened the lid, and neatly folded inside was a dress, lying there pretty as you please, with a piece of its hem creased, faded and dirty where it had been out in the weather for years. Fogarty lifted the dress as if it were made of spun dreams, and held it high to the sunrise. "Oh, you is a beauty, you is," he said, and tried to imagine the missus in it. He couldn't quite remember what she looked like, except that she had those soft brown eyes. She'd look just wonderful in this dress, he was sure.

Under the dress were little zippered bags with stockings and ladies' personal things, some makeup and bottles of soaps and lotions. There was a bright yellow sweater that smelled a little musty, but that could be washed out, all right.

Oh Fogarty, he thought. This is a wedding present fit for your bride.

He looked at the sunrise, and though the sun hadn't peeked over the horizon yet, it was full daylight out, and the shadows had softened. Fogarty would be waking up soon, he thought, so he refolded the sweater and the dress, put them back in the suitcase, and began a proud walk home.

She stood in the middle of the living room as he brought the old suitcase down the stairs. She wore his old plaid bathrobe, and her hair was

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squished down on one side where she'd slept on it wet and fresh from a washing.

"Hey, Fogarty," he said. "Morning to ya."

She looked at the ground and picked at her fingernails. She looked small, and frail, and afraid.

"Look what I gotcha," he said, and he hefted the suitcase, then brought it over and set it on the coffee table.

Curiosity brightened her eyes, and she looked at him with a question.

"It's my weddin' present to ya," he said. "Go on, open it. I think you'll like it. It was a blessing from the east."

She just looked at it, a little expression of pleasure around her mouth.

He reached over and snapped open the locks. "Go on," he said. "Open it."

She looked up at him with those doe eyes, and he felt silly.

"Don'tcha like it, Fogarty? Don'tcha want to see what's inside?"

She blinked once, and his face flushed. He didn't know what she wanted. He reached down in exasperation and turned the suitcase around to face him and flipped up the clasps.

She put a hand on his arm and bent down, over the back hinges.

"What? What is it?"

She reached over, tugged on something, and Fogarty heard paper tear. Then she stood up, and in her hand she held a little tiny piece of yellowed paper. She looked at it, and her eyes opened wide with wonder, and she handed it to him, excitement putting a flush into her cheeks.

It was a piece of a page torn out of what looked like a paperback novel, only it was so faded and water-stained that hardly anything was legible at all. Fogarty looked at it, front and back, and started to set it down, but the missus held his hand and urged it again toward him.

He took a long look at her, and she nodded in encouragement, and he looked at the scrap again, impatient for her to be done with this silliness and see his wedding present. He examined the paper again, and just where it was torn were two words, faded almost into obscurity. Almost, but not quite. The words were: Mary languished.

"Mary la lan lang ished Mary lang-ished. Mary languished," Fogarty read, and the missus nodded her head.

"Mary languished," she said. "Me." And she thumped her chest with her fingertips for emphasis.

"You?" Fogarty was astonished, surprised, and delighted. He hadn't seen

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her with this much enthusiasm. "Mary languished?"

She took the paper and licked it, then stuck it to her cheek. Her posture took on a whole new angle.

"Well, Mary Languished," Fogarty said. "Well," he said with a big grin, "well, Mary Languished Fogarty, this suitcase must be for you. It has your name on it. And when you're done opening it, we can use it for a sunrise chair outside."

Mary Languished touched the piece of paper, smiled at him with stars in her eyes, and got on with opening her wedding present.

Chapter 4

FOGARTY LEANED over the fender of the old red Corvair and picked little weeds out of his vegetable garden. He had vegetables growing in every engine compartment of every car in this side of the dump. His fingers touched the hairy leaves of the squash vines and stroked the smooth skins of the zucchini, and he hummed softly to them. "Beauties, you is. Beauties." He kept an ear cocked for Mary Languished, expecting to hear her footsteps. She'd taken to exploring the landfill, spending her days foraging, just as he'd done. She'd brought home some little things, some nice little things, Fogarty thought, like a pottery jar to hold the cookstove matches. It was rough on the outside and swirly blue on the inside. Very nice.

He told her about the dangers: big rats that came out at night, and about the kids, teenagers, mostly, that came to shoot their guns. He showed her some hiding places he'd made, and how to find them, and she seemed happy and competent in the landfill. He tried not to worry when she went out, but he did anyway.

He left the zucchini and went to the yellow Volkswagen, where tomatoes sprawled about. He looked out across the horizon, but could see nothing — nothing but the same landscape he'd seen every morning. No movement, no sign of life, no Mary Languished.

He spoke softly to the tomatoes, thanking them as he used his penknife to cut the ripest — four had to be cut today; that meant tomatoes for lunch and dinner and breakfast again tomorrow, but maybe he could dry some, too, so they could have some hot tomato soup when the snow began to fly.

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With gentle fingers, he put the four red fruits in the cutoff plastic jug he'd tied to his waist, and looked up again to see if he could see Mary Languished. She'd been gone quite a while.

The potatoes were in the bed of the old pickup truck, and he took his time going over to them. Providing food for two people was a lot more work than for just one, but most times he found it a joyful chore.

Mary Languished had turned out to be a startling and pleasant addition to Fogarty's life. He had to keep reminding her to change clothes, and he had to make sure she bathed regularly, but life took on a whole new depth with another person in the house. There was a person to talk to, instead of the clock, or the chair, even if she never answered. She was quick with certain games and puzzles, and others didn't interest her, or she didn't understand them. She kept quiet most times; she hardly ever spoke, but now and then she'd get involved in a project and begin whistling, a sound so beautiful to Fogarty's ears that he would go all soft and wilty, listening. He'd learned to not let on, though, or she'd stop and blush and not do it again until it just came out of her automatically.

He wanted to ask her about her music, wanted to ask her about her life, her background, how she came to be in the culvert under the freeway that night, but he knew that the way to ask people things was to share with them about yourself. Now and then, little scraps of memory, like bits of ash floating on the wind, would flutter through his mind — a child's face, a refrigerator door, an office phone number — but then they would be gone, and he would be left with just a lingering feeling of things left undone. There wasn't anything he could do about those things — he had to just let it all be.

Fogarty lifted up the black plastic that covered the heavy bunches of potatoes, and cut off two nice ones for the day's eating. Then he looked off in the direction Mary Languished had gone, and worried anew. He hoped she wasn't out there in trouble. He hoped she hadn't hurt herself trying to bring something back that was too big for her to handle. He hoped nobody had seen her and given her a hard time.

He hoped she wasn't out there whistling into nobody's ears and wasting the music.

He went on to the general vegetable garden in the topless bus and checked on the seats filled with late-summer meals. Between the carrots and the broccoli, he stood up and looked out the broken bus window, and

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saw her coming over the hill. Sure enough, she was carrying something, and she was hurrying.

His heart flew when he saw her coming toward him, and he knew he was growing to love Mary Languished, with a deep, permanent kind of love. That, too, brought a tickle from the feather of a memory, but nothing substantial enough to stop him for a moment. He picked a sprig of parsley and pulled up one fat carrot, grabbed a handful of snap beans that were growing up over the back emergency door, put them all into his side carrier, and went down the bus stairs to meet her.

"Fogarty!" she yelled as soon as she saw him, and she began to hurry faster. He looked around quickly to make sure nobody was lurking within shouting distance, for she surely was shouting. "Fogarty!" she said again, and made straight for him. He'd never seen her so excited. Her hair was flying out from under her knitted hat, and she had on that pretty summer dress he'd found in her wedding present suitcase that fit her slender frame and made her look pretty and fresh as springtime, even though the weather was closing in on autumn and she was closing in on middle age. She wore it with her old leather boots for tramping through the trash, and half a dozen pairs of mismatched socks, and now those unlaced old leather boots were stomping along, making a terrible racket. The dress was flying out from behind her, and her eyes were as wide open as they could be, and she carried a blue bundle in front of her.

"Fogarty!" she yelled again, and this time she sounded so urgent, he began to run toward her.

She stopped, and bent over at the waist — he could see her taking deep breaths, trying to catch her wind, as he ran up toward her — and when he reached her, she looked at him with wild eyes and thrust the bundle into his hands.

The bundle moved, and Fogarty jumped and would have thrown it down, except for the expression on Mary Languished's face. He held it out away from him until she pulled back the blanket top, and there it was. A baby. A baby looking back at him with clear blue eyes.

Fogarty just stared at the infant, astonished beyond words, beyond thoughts, even. A baby — who'd have thought a baby would be out here? Who brought him here? Nobody came out here — how'd it get here? And it was healthy — at least it looked plump and well fed; and happy — at least it wasn't crying. What was a baby doing here?

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He looked at Mary Languished, whose face was still red and wet with perspiration, and she was still breathing hard from the run home with her find. She looked back at him expressionless.

"It's Moses," she finally said, and touched the baby's forehead.

Chapter 5

FOGARTY CARRIED the baby into the house, and for the rest of the day, he and Mary Languished took turns looking at him.

Fogarty could feel his shoulders relax every time he looked at Moses. The pudgy little baby with the penetrating blue eyes had the same effect on Mary Languished; Fogarty had seen it. When the baby looked up at him, he felt something move deep inside him, something big, something gentle. And all the tension went out of his neck and his shoulders and his back, and he stood taller and felt his face get looser, and his big hands hung slack and comfortable at his sides. He could gaze into the child's remarkable eyes and let the world pass him by.

Fogarty had Mary Languished mash up some zucchini and corn and feed it to Moses, who seemed to like it all right, but Fogarty knew that the child needed milk . . . milk and other things. That night, they put him down in a dresser drawer at the foot of their bed, and he stayed quiet all night.

The next morning when Fogarty got up, he found the drawer empty. Mary Languished had the baby, waltzing him around the little living room, singing.

Fogarty looked at the two of them, and he began to remember the nightmares that had flitted through his dreams. Nightmares of responsibility. How would he find milk for the child? Moses needed milk, and a crib and a high chair. And diapers, oh Lord! It was enough trying to keep Mary Languished clean. . . . How could he keep the baby in clean diapers? What would he do if the water faucet were taken away? Or if something happened to him? What if the baby got sick? And whose baby was it, anyway?

Then Mary Languished laughed and twirled and handed Moses to him, and he took the child and gazed into those clear blue eyes, and the nightmares fled and his shoulders relaxed and the only thing that mattered was his son.

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After breakfast, Fogarty fashioned a sling so Mary Languished could carry their boy, and they went up and out into the sunlight.

"Blue place," was all Mary Languished could say to describe to Fogarty where she'd found the baby. Fogarty had never seen a "blue place" in the dump, and couldn't imagine what she was talking about. He wanted to find this "blue place." He thought if there was a baby in the blue place, then there might be baby supplies there, too. Mary Languished gave him a queer look, then shrugged and led the way, Moses snugly tucked into the sling across her front.

They started off north, silently trudging, listening to the crunch of their footsteps, the gurgle of the baby. They watched for people, cribs, high chairs, and anything blue, and they smelled autumn on the breeze.

Fogarty hiked on, surveying his kingdom, pleased that everything seemed to be right with the dump. There was no evidence of vandals or vermin; no major disturbances around his home. The only clues that things weren't as they seemed were the baby and Mary Languished's mention of a blue place.

Suddenly Mary Languished hugged the baby to her and began running, her unlaced boots flopping around her feet. She reached a plastic sack with handles, and lifted it high.

Fogarty caught up with her and took the bag. Inside was a nice sweater, slate blue, Fogarty's size. He liked it. There was also a new toothbrush, still sealed in its package. "Good, Mary Languished. Good work. Thanks to you." He smiled and bowed.

"Blue here."

"Blue what?"

"Blue air."

"Blue air?"

"Blue air, blue," she gestured widely. "Trash, blue. . . . Blue!"

"Where?"

"Here," she said, indicating the whole area with a sweep of her arm. "All this. Blue."

Fogarty couldn't make any sense of what she was saying. "What do you mean, Mary Languished?"

"Fogarty," she said, matching the seriousness of his expression. "Blue. Everything blue."

"Where was the baby?"

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She walked a little way and stopped. She stared at the ground, and then pointed.

Fogarty followed her and looked where she pointed. In a little sheltered area was a wooden cradle with an odd little symbol carved in the headboard.

Fogarty squatted down and ran his finger over the symbol. It was black, as if burned into the old wood. There were three round dots, like three points of a triangle, inside an oval.

He straightened up. "Where's the blue?"

They looked at each other for a long moment. Fogarty felt some deep, familiar emotion come welling up within him; he felt like running away; he felt like crying. Then Moses began to squirm inside the sling, and Mary Languished pulled him free of the restrictive cloth and held him up to the early-morning sunshine. She smiled at the boy and turned him so Fogarty could see his face.

The baby looked wise somehow, and Fogarty gazed into the little face until he felt that smile come out from the inside of him, and soon they were all laughing.

Mary Languished set the baby into his cradle. "Such a blessing," he found himself saying to her. He put his arm around her, and they both looked at their son, and in a few moments she picked up the baby and he picked up the cradle and they made their way back home.

Chapter 6

FOGARTY FOUND it hard to go up the stairs. He was ready to go to town; he had his coat on, his lining pockets empty and ready to be filled with supplies, a few extra bags tucked away. He thought of the long walk out of the landfill, along the road and into town. He thought of finding bedding for the two days it would take for him to finish foraging in the city for the things that he and Mary Languished and Moses needed. He thought of those things, being out there in the cold, alone, while they were warm and comfortable in their little dwelling, and he was very reluctant indeed to climb up the stairs.

But Moses needed milk and meat and diapers, and Mary Languished needed some female things, and Fogarty had to provide those things for his family. And he had a twenty-dollar bill that felt warm and pleasant in his pocket.

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Mary Languished had gotten up to see him off, and she stood in the kitchen, wearing his bathrobe and holding Moses. Fogarty resisted the temptation to go to her, take the baby, and just hold him and rock him.

He looked at her sweet face, still sleep-puffed, and wondered if she'd change his diaper even once in the two days he'd be gone. He'd already reminded her three times that he'd be gone two nights, and how she had to bathe herself and the baby each night. She never talked, so he never knew if she understood.

He wanted to leave feeling confident about her — he wanted to see a little row of white dish towels in the kitchen, too — but instead, he gave her a last smile and a wave, and went up the stairs, opened the old blue Pontiac door, and his breath steamed out into the starry, dewy, early morning.

He felt naked without his customary bags of bottles and cans and selected little items he'd scrounged to sell. He felt incomplete without them, but he didn't miss them; those things never brought him more than three or four dollars anyway. He had a whole twenty-dollar bill this time, and he could buy just about anything he wanted with that.

He patted his pocket one more time, felt the money, and set off down the trail toward the fence. He wanted to be well away from the landfill by daybreak.

"Such a blessing," he said to himself as he walked over familiar territory under familiar stars. "Such a blessing to be free and rich." He stopped for a moment and scratched his head. "And to have a family waiting at home," he said, and smiled.

Dawn began as he reached the fence; the stars had faded into blue sky by the time he reached the main road, and the full adventure of the trip before him filled his soul with excitement, and his feet became lighter. He ran through the list of purchases again in his mind, and wondered if he'd have money left over to put a little wager in on one of the ponies running.

No, Fogarty, he said to himself. No more ponies. Have you forgotten the sickness?

He hadn't forgotten. No more ponies, he promised himself, and he walked along the road into town as traffic picked up, and he thought of the place where he'd found the money — the same place he'd found the cradle for Moses. The Blue Place, Mary Languished still called it.

The Blue Place.

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The Blue Place pulled on Fogarty, pulled on him the same way that clear-eyed gaze of Moses did.

Fogarty had gone back there a few days after finding the cradle, and he found a high chair, right in the same place. It was a wooden high chair that looked just like the cradle; it even had the same carved symbol on the back of the seat: three dots, like the points of a triangle, inside an oval.

Mary Languished loved it. She set Moses in it, and he sat up as pretty as you please and grinned at his parents.

The few days after that kept Fogarty busy with putting down the last of the vegetable before the frost, and then he knew he was going to have to hustle to scavenge enough bottles and cans for all the things they needed to get them through the next couple of months. Usually, harvesting and laying in the last of the vegetables was a joyful chore, but this time as he worked, he worried.

He kept one eye on the sky, and other on the last tin of meat in the cabinet, and he worked hard, and fast. The baby needed milk.

Scavenging had become harder. Fogarty wasn't as strong as he once was, and the landfill was growing. The trash shifted and changed like the ocean, with the winds constantly rearranging the top, the rot, rust, and decay rearranging below. But for eight, going on nine winters, Fogarty had scavenged the whole area, and bottles and cans and salable goods became harder to find. The richest deposits of bankable items were closer to the fresher landfill, and that was far, far from his home, and risky.

And now, the Blue Place.

The Blue Place pulled on Fogarty — pulled on him the same way that clear-eyed gaze of Moses did. Fogarty wanted to go to the Blue Place every day. He wanted to go there and wait; he wanted to be there when the things arrived; he wanted to see the magic. He wanted to see the Blue. He could hardly work for thinking about how he'd rather be at the Blue Place.

He'd rather be there or else just playing with his son. When he gazed into Moses's eyes, he felt that everything was perfect, everything was fine, everything has been, is, and would forever be just wonderful.

Both things were a distraction to him, a man not used to distractions. Both were inexplicable; both were fascinating, irresistible. The Blue Place seemed to manufacture things they needed: that cradle hadn't been there,

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and that high chair hadn't been there, and that baby hadn't been there, and then all of a sudden they were. They just appeared, and he hadn't seen anybody coming or going or lurking around in the dump. It mystified Fogarty, and he thought about that Blue Place the whole time he worked in the garden.

As soon as he was finished putting down the vegetables, without even taking the Sabbath off to rest, he set off to scavenge for the inevitable trip to town.

The first place he went was the Blue Place.

Fogarty had gotten there just after sunrise. He climbed a little mound of debris and looked around, surveying the territory, looking for new things, weird things, anything blue or magic or moving. He saw nothing unusual, nothing but the normal speckled gray/white/rust landscape with its hollows and shadows, spreading out as far as he could see.

"Blue," Fogarty said. "Where are ya, Blue? And what are ya, anyway?"

The Blue didn't answer him, so Fogarty smiled, and shook his head, and stepped down off the mound, and as he did, he caught sight of something little and green, flapping in the early-morning breeze.

He couldn't believe what he thought he saw, so he walked calmly over to it. It was a twenty-dollar bill, with one end caught underneath a stone, and it looked to be in exactly the same place the cradle had been. He picked it up and smelled it, then ironed it out by pulling it back and forth across his nose.

"Twenty dollars," he said. "Is that from you, Blue?" He looked up into the blue sky, and snapped off a salute. "My missus and my son thank ya, Blue." And he chuckled and pocketed the bill, then made his way back to the house, glad he didn't have to go scratching and picking for bottles and cans.

Mary Languished hadn't even seemed surprised. She just kept whistling, singing, and babbling to the baby in that silly little language she seemed to have made up, and Fogarty just smelled that twenty-dollar bill and sat in his chair, sipping tea, feeling rich, and making plans to set out for town the next day.

As the heat of the sun began to penetrate the heavy coat Fogarty wore to town, sweat that cooled in the fall morning began to trickle down his face. He walked along the street, smelling city smells, morning smells; and

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he saw people walking, talking, driving, laughing, working, eating; and suddenly he thought that his life was blessed indeed.

Who else has some kind of invisible Blue give them money? And babies? And furniture?

Nobody, that's who, Fogarty, he thought to himself, and suddenly he had to go to the bathroom.

He found himself a Shell station and went in, locked the door, and sat down. Maybe there's something wrong with me, he thought. Things like this just don't happen to regular folk. He put his chin on his hand and his elbow on his knee, and he tried to remember anybody else he'd ever heard of that had things like this happen to them.

He couldn't think of any.

When he was finished, he flushed the toilet and washed his hands, and he felt better.

Maybe it isn't wrong, Fogarty, he thought. Maybe it's *right*. Maybe we are so blessed. . . .

A frown wrinkled his forehead. He'd never heard of anybody being *that* blessed before.

He thought of his home, and Mary Languished, and figured that right at that exact moment, she'd be feeding Moses his breakfast. He pictured them in his mind's eye, Moses sitting in his little high chair, one of Lee and Donna's used-to-be-white kitchen towels around his neck, another one around his bottom. Mary Languished would be mashing up vegetables with the last bit of meat from a dented can, and feeding him, both of them laughing, Mary Languished speaking that strange little musical language, and the baby responding as if he understood.

The home scene seemed a little weird to Fogarty as he looked at himself in the service station washroom mirror. Something wasn't quite right.

Yet it was all so normal when he was at home. Especially when he found himself speaking that same funny little musical language to his son.

Out here in the real world of Shell station toilets, that memory made him more than mildly uncomfortable.

He ran cold water on his hands and splashed his face. "A family is a blessing, Fogarty," he said to his reflection. "And every family has its quirks. Now you go buy the things your family needs."

"O.K.!" he said back to himself, and then he got serious and pointed his finger at himself. "And no ponies."

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He smiled and smoothed his eyebrows back and stepped back out into the sunshine.

Chapter 7

BY NIGHTFALL, Fogarty had acquired almost everything he needed. The filled pockets in the lining of his coat made it hot and heavy, and it floated awkwardly around his legs and banged into his calves.

He was pleased with the way the day had gone. He had scrounged in his usual spots and come away with some good things. He'd gotten half a dozen dented cans of tuna and another half a dozen of corned beef for a dollar. He got diapers from the Salvation Army, and Mary Languished's female things from the loading dock of the supermarket. A new boy had cut a carton too deeply and spoiled a couple of boxes. Fogarty was grateful to give the lad two dollars for them. The only thing left was cans of milk for Moses, and Fogarty worried how he would carry cases of cans of milk all the way home.

He decided to postpone the worry; to treat himself instead to an extravagance — a hot dog from a red-hot stand near the library. It cost a dollar, but he piled on the ketchup and mustard and pickle relish and threw a few good onions on, too, just to be sure he got his money's worth. Then he sat on the big lawn at the library and watched the traffic and the bicycles and the birds and the kids, and he thought about his day.

It had been a good day. He'd hardly thought of Mary Languished and Moses, except, of course, when considering the things on his shopping list. He sat on the library lawn and ate his hot dog and licked his lips and tried to imagine what the two of them were doing at his home right this minute, and he couldn't even remember what they looked like. He couldn't believe there were people in his house.

But, of course, there were.

Fogarty finished the last bite of bun, licked his fingers, and wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his shirt. He stood up and took off his laden coat, folded it carefully, and laid it on the ground. Then he stretched out on the cool grass and put his head on the bundle.

Ahhh, the freedom. The freedom felt so cool, so nice. He was free to go wherever he wanted, to do whatever he wanted. He still had twelve dollars

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in his pocket, and he was almost finished with his duties. He thought he'd have to spend two nights out, but now he had to spend only one. He could make it back to Lee and Donna's before they closed the restaurant for the night, and have a sleep there, then get the canned milk and go home in the morning.

Canned milk.

His brow furrowed. His freedom fled. How'm I going to carry canned milk on top of all this other stuff all the way out to the landfill? He wouldn't be free until he figured out how to take the milk to Moses.

He had twelve dollars; he could take a taxi.

A taxi!

The thought made him sit up and hoot. Everyone passing by turned to look at him.

"Take a taxi, I could," he said to them, then chuckled and lay back down on the lawn. "Take a taxi. That's good."

But the problem of the milk remained.

I could buy a cow.

A cow!

This time he rolled over on his stomach and laughed, and beat the ground with his fist. "Buy a cow!" He laughed until his cheeks hurt, until his stomach was sore, until his fist was bruised, until tears ran down his face. Slowly, control came back to him, and he wiped his face, giggling still, and he looked up at the people watching him, and he laughed some more. "Oh, what a blessing it is," he said to them, although he didn't think they could understand him through his laughter, "to have a little freedom; yes, it is; yes, it is." And he lay back down and tried to calm himself, but his stomach still shook with silent waves of laughter when he remembered what a great laugh he'd just had.

Then he remembered Mary Languished and Moses, and the worry over the cleanliness of his home returned. The fact that there were people in his home waiting for him, depending on him, quietly vacuumed up his freedom.

He stood up, put on his heavy coat, and began to walk toward Lee and Donna's restaurant. They might have a good idea about the stupid milk.

Fogarty had to stop and rest six times — he counted them, six times — on the way home in the early-morning heat. In addition to the hot, heavy

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coat he wore, he carried a big box of powdered milk from Lee and Donna, and a case of canned milk on his shoulder. He'd told Lee and Donna that Mary Languished had a passion for drinking milk — for some reason he couldn't quite bring himself to tell them that he and Mary Languished had found a baby in the dump. Lee and Donna had been very happy to send him home with a box of powdered milk, and he'd stopped and bought a case of canned milk at the last store outside the city.

He was happy to be bringing these things home to his family, but he'd never had to stop and rest before, not even after a hard morning's work at the restaurant.

He rested again as soon as he managed to put himself through the wires on the fence, and he set the box and the case down and mopped his brow.

"Almost home, Fogarty," he said to himself, and a little smile of home came to rest on his face.

Then he stood and hefted his bundles and, with weak knees and a wobbly stride, made it down the home stretch.

"Mary Languished! I'm home! Oh, what a blessing it is to be in out of the hot, hot sunshine." Fogarty came down the stairs as quickly as he could manage, and he set the case of milk on the counter and the box of milk on the floor, and shed his coat as he looked around his living room.

Mary Languished had moved all the furniture around. It looked a little strange, but it looked all right, if only she'd put the footstool in front of the right chair, and move it all back against the walls again, like it was supposed to be.

"Mary Languished?" Fogarty set the footstool back in front of his chair, then glanced inside the bedroom and the bathroom. All was quiet, and everything was as it should be, so he went to his chair and sat down.

"A drink of water would be a blessing, Fogarty," he said, so he heaved himself out of his chair and went to the kitchen to get the water jug.

It was empty. Fogarty held it up and looked at it. That meant he had to go all the way up and around the old boiler for a drink. He was too tired. He'd do it later. He set the bottle back down under the counter, and as he did, something else caught his eye.

He pulled back the other curtain, and there, under the counter, was a case of canned milk, the cardboard pried up in one corner, one can missing.

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Fogarty's mouth fell open as he stared. He looked at the heavy case of canned milk he'd brought all the way from town, dark spots on the top where drops of his sweat had fallen, wet handprint stains on the sides where he'd frequently changed his grip.

He looked back and forth between the two, and then went back to the living room and sat down in his chair.

A moment later he saw a shadow cross over one of the skylights. His heart leapt into his throat, and then the shadow passed, and he heard Mary Languished's voice as she came near to the front door. He stood up as the door opened and she came down the stairs, singing.

She seemed surprised to see him. Fogarty lifted his laden coat from the floor where he had dropped it, and moved it to the sofa.

She gave him a bashful smile, and Fogarty felt somehow betrayed as he looked at her. He felt a vague uneasiness about her being in his house, moving things around, risking security by wandering around the landfill, making him go out on wild-goose chases for canned milk she never even needed.

"Fogarty," she said softly, and she brought Moses up from where he'd been resting in his sling at her side, and she held the baby up to Fogarty.

Fogarty's hands automatically took the baby from her, and he broke his gaze from Mary Languished's face and looked at Moses.

His son.

Those clear blue eyes looked back into Fogarty's eyes, and Fogarty felt rested and well. His mind cleared of all its anxiety and poisonous thoughts, and nothing mattered in the whole wide world except the nourishment and happy home life of this perfect child with the clear eyes.

Moses.

His son.

Chapter 8

FOGARTY AWOKE in the still darkness. Moonlight shone in through the skylight in the bedroom. Mary Languished breathed deeply beside him; Moses made little cooing noises in the basket at the foot of the bed. Fogarty sat up and looked down at the baby, who was gently playing with his toes and quietly amusing himself. Moses had thrown off his quilt, but he didn't seem to be feeling cold, so

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Fogarty let him be. He lay back down on the bed and pulled the covers up to his chin. The frost was definitely on; snow would be flying before Thanksgiving. He snuggled down and felt the warmth from Mary Languished's body beside him.

That weird feeling of things not being normal began to creep over him again, like a slow rush of goose bumps.

Mary Languished had found the case of canned milk in the landfill at the same place he'd found the money. The Blue Place.

Fogarty shook his head. He just didn't understand any of this. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he had memories of a woman and a baby, and he sort of remembered, and that made him smile a lot when he was at Lee and Donna's, because they had their baby, and the baby cried a lot. . . .

The baby cried a lot. . . .

The baby cried a lot, and the baby slept a lot.

Moses never cried. And rarely — if ever, now that Fogarty thought about it — slept.

Lee and Donna's baby cried a lot and slept a lot, and Lee and Donna spent a lot of time with their arms around each other and their noses touching. They goo-gooed to their baby, and all of it made Fogarty smile as the little memories buried back there in the landfill of his mind shuffled around a bit, not exactly springing forth to be recognized, but he remembered. Sort of.

There was no physical affection between him and Mary Languished. They never touched, or cuddled — she was too shy. And they never discussed their pride over the baby with each other; they seemed to discuss it with Moses. In his own language.

Fogarty ran his hand over his face in the dark. Something's really strange here, he thought.

Then he raised up again and looked at Moses in his cradle, and Moses stopped his playing and looked back at him, directly at him, those clear blue eyes looking deeply into Fogarty's soul.

Everything is O.K., Fogarty thought, and he lay back down and went to sleep.

In the morning, Mary Languished fed Moses and rocked him while Fogarty watched. Her eyes kept shifting around the room; she seemed restless and couldn't meet his gaze. Finally he put on his coat and went

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up to forage for a while. Then he saw the hose.

A long patchwork hose made up of lots of little hoses hooked together stretched across the top of the dump from the deserted hydrant and disappeared into the trash next to his house. Fogarty was sure it went right into the kitchen, where Mary Languished could use it at will instead of having to walk up and out and over to the hydrant for water.

Anger burned up through Fogarty. That woman's going to get us discovered here, he thought, and marched right over to the hydrant. He turned it off, then disconnected the hose. He walked back toward home, disconnecting and burying pieces as he went. She didn't even try to cover it up, he thought.

"Roamin' the landfill during daylight hours, drawing a straight line toward the house, sending me out on wild goose chases. . . ." Fear of discovery turned quickly to anger and rumbled out of Fogarty's mouth in a monotone of discontent.

He reached the blue Pontiac door and pulled it open. Mary Languished stood there with Moses in his sling, Fogarty's clock under one arm, and surprise on her face.

"Fogarty!" she said.

"Mary Languished," he said, and bowed his head. "Where are you about to?"

A blush came up her neck into her cheeks. "This clock's for the Blue, Fogarty," she said. "For thanks."

Fogarty was stunned. "My clock?"

Mary Languished nodded.

"Does the Blue want my clock?"

She shrugged.

Fogarty stepped aside, and Mary Languished looked down, then came out. Fogarty went inside, closing the door after him. He descended the stairs and watched her shadow cross the skylights, then he looked at the spot on the wall where his clock had hung for six, going on seven winters. He'd foraged that clock and set it to working right. He even sold pop bottles and beer cans for money to buy brand-new batteries for it.

The house didn't look right without the clock. What did the Blue want with the clock, anyway? Maybe it would have been just as happy with a can of milk or a rag.

Fogarty found the hole in the wall next to the sink where the end of

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the hose came through. It was all wet; she'd just turned the hydrant on and let it leak inside the wall. He pushed it back up gently, then went back upstairs and pulled it out of the ground. He went to the old boiler and buried the hose up next to it.

Instead of patting the old boiler and listening to its wonderful hollow sound, Fogarty scowled at it and went to the hydrant for a drink.

When Mary Languished returned, Fogarty was sitting on the couch staring into space, waiting for her, his bowels churning. He saw her shadow pass across the skylights, and a knot tightened in his stomach. Then the door opened and closed, and she stepped gingerly down the stairs.

She came into the living room, unslung Moses from her side, and sat in the big chair, the baby in her lap.

"Did the Blue come, Mary Languished?"

She nodded, but did not look up at him.

"You saw it? You saw the Blue come take the clock?"

She began to pick at her fingernails.

"Did it take the clock?"

She shook her head and pulled at her hat.

"Where's the clock? Didn't you bring it home?"

This time she looked him squarely in the eyes. "Can't take back a gift," she whispered.

"If the Blue didn't want it. . . ."

"Belongs to Blue," she said, and picked up the baby from where he'd been resting on her knees, and brought him to her chest. She began to rock him.

"I took the hose apart, Mary Languished," Fogarty said. "You oughtn't have done that. It was like a trail, right to our house."

"Never left nothin' new, Fogarty," she said.

"What?"

"Blue never left nothing new."

"Maybe you oughtn't go there in the daytime anymore."

"Why?"

"Because we're gonna get discovered, that's why. You can't just leave a hose trail and go traipsin' about all day long, Mary Languished. Someone's going to see us and get suspicious." Fogarty felt heat come up his chest.

Mary Languished looked hurt, as if he'd insulted her.

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"And they'll throw us out," he said. "Or maybe put us in a home."

Mary Languished stopped rocking and stared into her own memories. "And take Moses away."

Mary Languished hugged the baby tighter and started rocking fast. "No, Fogarty, you don't know."

"Know what, Mary Languished?"

"Blue decides."

"Mary Languished, the Blue don't decide about the County guys!"

Mary Languished stood up and walked over to the couch. She held the baby out for Fogarty to see, but Fogarty pushed her away.

"I don't want to see the baby," he said. He knew that if he looked into Moses's eyes, that everything would settle down again, everything would be fine again. No, he would only *think* everything was fine again, but nothing would be fine unless Mary Languished understood what he was saying.

Mary Languished turned again, and held Moses up in front of Fogarty, and somehow, against his will, Fogarty looked at that sweet, clean baby face, and those clear, clear blue eyes, and all his fears fled, and a sense of security and well-being settled over him.

The next day she took his footstool. The day after that she took the quilt from the bed and replaced it with an ugly old stained, torn blanket.

Fogarty began to mourn.

He stayed in the house because he couldn't keep Mary Languished from going out, and he didn't want too many people roaming the landfill. He stayed in the house and watched her feed Moses and carry him around and talk to him in that stupid little language they had for each other. He stayed in the house and watched her loot his little home, piece by sentimental piece, and he didn't say anything. He stayed in the house and watched Moses grow healthy and strong and begin to crawl around the floor, and his emotions skidded up and down like they were on a roller coaster. He stayed in the house and stayed in the house and stayed in the house. The longer he stayed in the house, the deeper his depression grew.

Every now and then, he would look into Moses's face, and the depression would dissolve. Happiness surged through him, and he felt strong and good and wise. Then Mary Languished would swoop down and pick up Moses, and they would laugh and laugh together, and the feelings Fogarty

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had lasted for only a few more moments; then they slipped away, and he plunged further into the pit of desolation.

He suffered in silence for a long time, and then he couldn't stand it anymore.

When Mary Languished returned home after taking his porcelain chamber pot to the Blue Place, as soon as she started fixing dinner for Moses, Fogarty got up out of his chair, put on his coat, and went outside.

The air was crisp and cold, the shadows long. He smelled snow on the air, the fresh, delicious air, and he ran in place for a moment, feeling his muscles freeing up after being inside for so many weeks.

He held his arms out and looked around his little domain, then set off to the Blue Place. He wanted to have a little talk with the Blue.

As he came over the rise, the first thing he saw was his beautiful chamber pot, atop a little pile of his possessions. Fogarty squatted down and examined each thing. It was all there; it was all intact. The quilt was a little damp, but that was no problem. He'd just pack it up and take it home.

Then he looked around and wondered if the Blue would come if he left a present for it. If the Blue came, he could talk to it. He fished out the penknife he'd kept in his pocket for as long as he could remember, gave it a kiss, and put it inside the chamber pot; then he sat down to wait.

He watched very carefully, because he wasn't sure how blue everything would get. Even the air came blue, Mary Languished said, so Fogarty watched very carefully for any signs of blue.

There were none.

He waited a long time. He waited until after the sun was down and the stars came out. He waited until his muscles cramped, until his joints ached from the cold. Then he stood up, shook out his limbs, and retrieved his pocketknife.

"Why are ya doing this to us, Blue?" he shouted. "Why do you give us things and then make everything so confused? Here. Take the pot. It's our thanks for the milk and the money and the baby. Take it. Take it. We want ya to."

Only silence answered him.

"How come Mary Languished wants to bring ya things ya don't want? How come you come only when she's here? How come you're doing all this to us? We're good people, and you're not doing nice things."

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He stopped to catch his wind. Only the breath of an evening breeze came through.

"I'm mad, Blue," Fogarty said, then stomped off toward home.

He got madder when he saw all the lights Mary Languished had put on. She must have lit every candle and lantern in the place. Light turned the skylights into beacons.

Time to go to town for a while, Fogarty, he thought to himself. Time to go see Lee and Donna. Time to go see the city and work in the restaurant and do some normal things, live a little normal life for a while.

But he was afraid to go. Afraid of what might be waiting for him — or not waiting for him — when he got back home.

Chapter 9

FOGARTY AWOKE in the middle of the night. He got up and used the old rusted bucket that had replaced his beautiful porcelain chamber pot, and then wandered through his little house. He didn't feel like getting back to bed with Mary Languished. He didn't want to listen to her breathe, and he didn't want to listen to Moses singing to himself in the cradle at the foot of the bed. Instead, he sat on the sofa and wrapped up in the soft knitted afghan that had so far escaped Mary Languished's offering to the Blue.

The moon shone down through the skylights, and Fogarty felt his bottom lip pout out in absolute despair.

He looked across the room to his favorite sitting chair, already naked without its ottoman. "Hey, yo, Mr. Chair," he whispered in the darkness. "How long before she takes you out to the cold?"

He wrapped the afghan tighter around his thin shoulders and gripped handfuls of it in his bony fists. "And you, Mrs. Blanket," he said. "You're the prettiest thing I have left. Soon you'll be out there warmin' up the chamber pot while I'm in here shiverin' and peeing in an old, no-account bucket."

The pout deepened. His head sunk down lower into the hollow between his shoulders. The closed-in feeling wrapped around him again, tighter then the afghan, tighter than his skin.

"Time to move on, Fogarty," he whispered to the night air, and sadness pushed behind his eyes. He thought of packing up his few precious things

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and carrying them out of the landfill. He saw himself, looking old and skinny, just a haggard old man, standing at the main road trying to decide which way to turn.

"I'm too old to start over again," he said, and the tightening feeling squeezed out a tear that ran down the side of his nose. He looked around the patchwork walls, and remembered how hard it was to build this little underground house all by himself. He thought of the years he had spent scavenging household items — finding, fixing, replacing — until he had his home comfortable and perfect. He probably didn't have that many years left, all told — he certainly wouldn't if he had to start all over again.

"What's the use?" he asked the pillow that sat next to him on the sofa; then he let go of the afghan and touched the pillow's worn velvet. "Might just as well up and die right now. There's nothing left for me."

A second tear followed the first, and Fogarty swiped at it with the pillow.

Then he got an idea that made his heart pound. He sat up straight. "I could move into the boiler, yes, I could," he said. "I could move into that nice, clean old boiler, and I could move my things over and be closer to my water, and Mary Languished could live here with Moses, and she could give all her own things away. She could give it all away, and I wouldn't care, because I would have all my stuff in my own place." He smiled. "She could even give away my things, and I could just go pick them up."

He sat back, shivering in anticipation of his new, good idea. "She could even give Moses away — yes, she could — she could even give Moses away, and I wouldn't care. I'd just go pick up the stuff I wanted to keep. She could give Moses away, and I wouldn't pick him up at all."

His smile became a grin.

And then he thought about Mary Languished traipsin' all over the landfill, carrying the baby, running water lines, and he knew that before long they'd be found out.

The smile evaporated.

They could take Mary Languished away, and he wouldn't mind, but he would give up for sure if they took him away and put him someplace stupid like they sometimes did with old men.

Depression pressed him back into the couch. He bunched up the little velvet pillow and squeezed it. "I wouldn't care at all if they took Mary Languished away," he whispered, and then he got another idea, a great

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idea, a horrible idea, an idea that he didn't like, an idea he tried to push away.

"I could just give Mary Languished away," he whispered in the dark. "I could just give Mary Languished and Moses both away, just take them to that Blue Place and leave 'em for the Blue. And I'd make them stay there, too, I would; I would make them stay."

Thoughts of Mary Languished and her soft brown eyes and her shy manner trying to make Fogarty reconsider made him bunch up his fist.

"I would make them stay there, yes, I would, yes, I would."

It wouldn't go away, his idea — it was too good — but it was so awful, and it made him feel so bad, so guilty, that finally he went to bed to snuggle next to Mary Languished's warm body to see if her sleeping sounds would make the idea go away.

It didn't go away, and it stayed with him all the rest of the night.

It was with him the next morning, too, and Fogarty couldn't look Mary Languished in the eye. He just put his head down and went about his business, bringing in the food, foraging a little bit out toward the east, just he and his idea, alone in the world.

By the time his stomach told him it was time for dinner, Fogarty had taken control of his idea. It was a bad idea, and he felt guilty that he'd let it play so long in his mind. He stood up from his diggings and rubbed his aching back. It was time to go make a nice dinner for Mary Languished and Moses. He could never confess the thoughts he'd had about them, but he could make it up to them by fixing them a nice hot dinner. Maybe some nice vegetable soup, and he'd even open a tin of meat.

He walked and walked to get home, surprised at how far away he'd gone during the day. By the time he spotted the blue Pontiac door, his heart gave a little leap. Home and hearth. "She's a good woman, Fogarty," he said to himself. "What a blessing it is to have such a fine family."

He opened the door and went down the stairs, noticing that it was bone-chilling cold inside. Mary Languished hadn't even started a fire. At the bottom of the stairs, he smelled dirty diapers and noticed that the woodbox was empty.

He knew by the coldness of the house that no one was home, but he called anyway. "Mary Languished?"

There was no answer.

His favorite sittin' chair was gone. And so was the knitted afghan. It

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was like she heard him out there whispering in the privacy of his own nighttime. Eavesdropping on his own sleeplessness. Taking his privacy, his sleeplessness, his chair, and his afghan in one slap.

Anger burned in his stomach. The bad idea returned with full force. It began to feel like a good idea.

Fogarty stomped up the stairs, hands stuffed in his pockets. He headed west, then circled south, avoiding the Blue Place, and he just stomped and talked to himself in anger, kicking things as he went. Eventually he ended up by the old boiler, and, before he recognized the old crate as firewood, he gave it a kick that splintered its old slats, and Fogarty grabbed it with his bare fingers and ripped it the rest of the way, driving slivers deep into the palms of his hands.

The pain brought him back to reality, and he looked at the pieces of crate, broken and twisted at his feet. He gathered them up and went home to build a fire.

By the time he got back, dusk had deepened and there was a faint light coming through the skylight.

Fogarty found one candle burning in the kitchen. Mary Languished stood in the middle of the living room, holding Moses, rocking him.

Fogarty threw the wood into the woodbox and dusted off his hands. He pulled two of the largest splinters out and left the rest for later. There was something that had to be done first.

He went to Mary Languished and took the baby from her and set him on the sofa. He put his hands on both of Mary Languished's shoulders and turned her to look him in the face.

"The chair, Mary Languished; you took the chair and the warm blanket. There's no wood and no food and too much . . . this is too much, do ya understand?"

"Never left nothing new, Fogarty," she said.

"Did it ever take the stuff you left it?"

She shook her head.

"Then let's go get it all and forget the Blue," he said.

She shook her head at him with a determination set to her jaw. "Can't," she said.

"Yes, Mary Languished," Fogarty said, and his hands burned with the slivers. "We can and we're going to. Right now."

"Blue protects us, Fogarty."

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"Well, that's fine. It can do that without all my stuff in a pile out in the weather. You make a fire and some tea, all right? I'll go get the stuff."

"No," she said, and turned to the sofa to pick up Moses.

"I don't want to look at the baby."

"Here." She struggled against him to get to the sofa.

"No." He held her arms firmly.

"Here!" She lunged.

"No!" He held tight.

"Aaaaaaaaa!" Mary Languished began to scream, and Moses began to sing, and the whole room began to turn blue.

Fogarty let her go, and he dropped to the floor. The room looked eerie, unreal, as if he were looking through a pair of blue glasses.

"I been a good man, Lord," he whispered. "I been a good man, yes, I has."

A gentle calm washed over Fogarty, and he relaxed on his knees, feeling safe and warm. Then he felt a tingling in his hands and looked at his palms and noticed that the slivers, almost black in the eerie blue light, were disappearing, and the skin healed and grew smooth as he watched.

He looked up and saw Mary Languished, barely breathing, rapture on her face, eyes open but seeing nothing, standing with feet apart and arms stretched out wide.

And Moses was laughing.

Chapter 10

WHEN THE blue faded away, so did Fogarty's sense of well-being. Mary Languished, still enraptured, picked up Moses and swung him around the little living room, and then she took him into the bedroom, while Fogarty pulled himself up from the floor and onto the couch, his old joints creaking like never before.

"The Blue protects them, yes, it does, yes, it does," he said to himself, still marveling at what happened. He shook his head and looked around, and suddenly found it hard to believe that it really had happened.

He sat on the sofa, and he thought about it, and thought about it, and thought about it.

He thought about having something looking over him all the time like that — something so powerful it could melt the slivers right out of a man's

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palm. Something so powerful it could be summoned just by a little yell. Something so important it could change him from blood-freezing fear to calm security in the space of a heartbeat.

He thought about it, and he didn't like it.

Mary Languished liked it. Mary Languished loved it.

Moses liked it. Moses loved it. Moses *was* it.

Barely a slip of a moon shone down through the darkest of night when Fogarty made his decision.

Very quietly, he arose from the sofa, stretched out his legs, rubbing out the cramps from sitting motionless for hours, then put on his jacket. He went into the bedroom and saw Moses, wide awake as always, looking at him with shining eyes from the crooked arm of a sleeping Mary Languished.

"Come, Moses," Fogarty said, trying not to look directly into the child's eyes. "Come to Daddy."

Fogarty picked him up gently, and Mary Languished sighed and rolled over in her sleep. Fogarty grabbed the bedding from the cradle and took it to the living room, where he wrapped the baby up tightly, determined not to look into those eyes that would immobilize him — or at least mesmerize him into inaction.

When he had Moses snugly wrapped, Fogarty took the little bundle in his arms, mounted the stairs, and opened the old blue Pontiac door into the freezing night air. His breath plumed out before him. The ground was frozen and covered with frost. Fogarty stepped gently until he was sure he was out of earshot, and then he walked quickly, even ran in places he knew were flat and without hazard.

At the Blue Place, Fogarty held the baby tightly to his chest. "I've come to give him back, Blue. It's too much, do you understand? We're grateful and all, but it's too much."

He laid the baby down in the same place where he had first appeared, and then stood back to watch.

Nothing happened.

Fogarty began to shiver, and he thought he would cry.

"C'mon, Blue," he said. "Please?"

But then he remembered that the Blue never came for him anyway, and he left Moses there under a slip of moon and went back to the house.

"Mary Languished," he whispered as he shook her shoulder. "Mary

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Languished, you must come with me. Moses has gone back to the Blue Place."

Mary Languished's eyes snapped open, and she looked around wildly for a moment, then focused on Fogarty.

"Come, " he said. "Moses is out in the cold."

Mary Languished looked down into the empty bed where the child had lain moments before, threw the covers off, and leapt out, fully dressed. She pushed past Fogarty, ran through the house and up the stairs without bothering for a sweater or a jacket, threw open the door, and ran out without shutting it behind her.

Fogarty was cold and winded, and couldn't keep up, but he followed her beeline to the Blue Place, and when he caught up with her, she was holding the bundle that was Moses and pulling at the bedding to uncover his face.

"You have to stay here now, Mary Languished," Fogarty said. "You and Moses are *my* offering to the Blue." He began to pick up his things and pile them in the big chair . . . the afghan first, then the porcelain chamber pot and the clock. He could come back for the other things.

"Fogarty," she said, her voice as soft as a spider on a web. "Fogarty and Fogarty."

The sharp edges of broken promises carved into his belly.

He turned to look at her, and she stood in a little hollow of trash, wearing the wedding dress he'd given her, her knitted hat, and a dozen pairs of old socks up and down her legs with unlaced boots open at her feet, their tongues lolling in the cold. She held the bundle to her chest, and looked at him with those soft, those wonderfully soft brown eyes, and Fogarty thought he heard the sound of sixteen-wheelers crossing over the sky.

"You'll be a blessing to the Blue, Fogarty," he said to her, then picked up the chair, an old, frail man proving a point, and he staggered under its weight as he carried it with a light heart and a sweaty brow toward home.

Early the next morning he went to fetch the rest of his things, and there was no sign of Mary Languished or Moses.

He put all of his belongings where they once had been cozying up his little home, and made a little daylight fire in celebration of his freedom. Then he went and packed up the little suitcase with Mary Languished's

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belongings and Moses's things and set them just outside the Pontiac door.

He took himself a shower and made himself a cup of tea and proposed himself a toast to Mary Languished Fogarty and Moses Fogarty, long may they live in peace.

The following morning he awoke while it was still dark. A sunrise for Fogarty this morning, he thought. He got dressed up in his warmest and warmed himself up by the stove, then went upstairs and into the crisp, starry early morning. He found an old suitcase by the door and carried it toward the east.

He carried the old suitcase past the old boiler, and he gave the boiler a pat on the side, loving its deep, hollow ring. "Hello, Mr. Boiler, sir," he said to it. "Such a nice old boiler you are." He continued east, and when he found a suitable place, he put the suitcase down and sat on it. Then he bounced up and down a couple of times. "Hey," he said. "This suitcase makes a good chair. This suitcase makes a good old sunrise chair." He admired the old suitcase for a while longer — and decided to keep it. It might fetch fifty cents or so in town, but then, he'd always wanted a sunrise chair.

He sat and watched the sky lighten and expand into a blaze of glory, and was enthralled.

"Such a blessing, to have a sunrise like this, Fogarty, such a blessing on such a beautiful morning," he said to himself, his freedom feeling cool and nice, but then just a little tickle of sadness slithered in to confuse him. It felt a little like loneliness, and somewhere in the back of his mind was a memory, somewhere, of a wife, and a child, but he couldn't quite place it.

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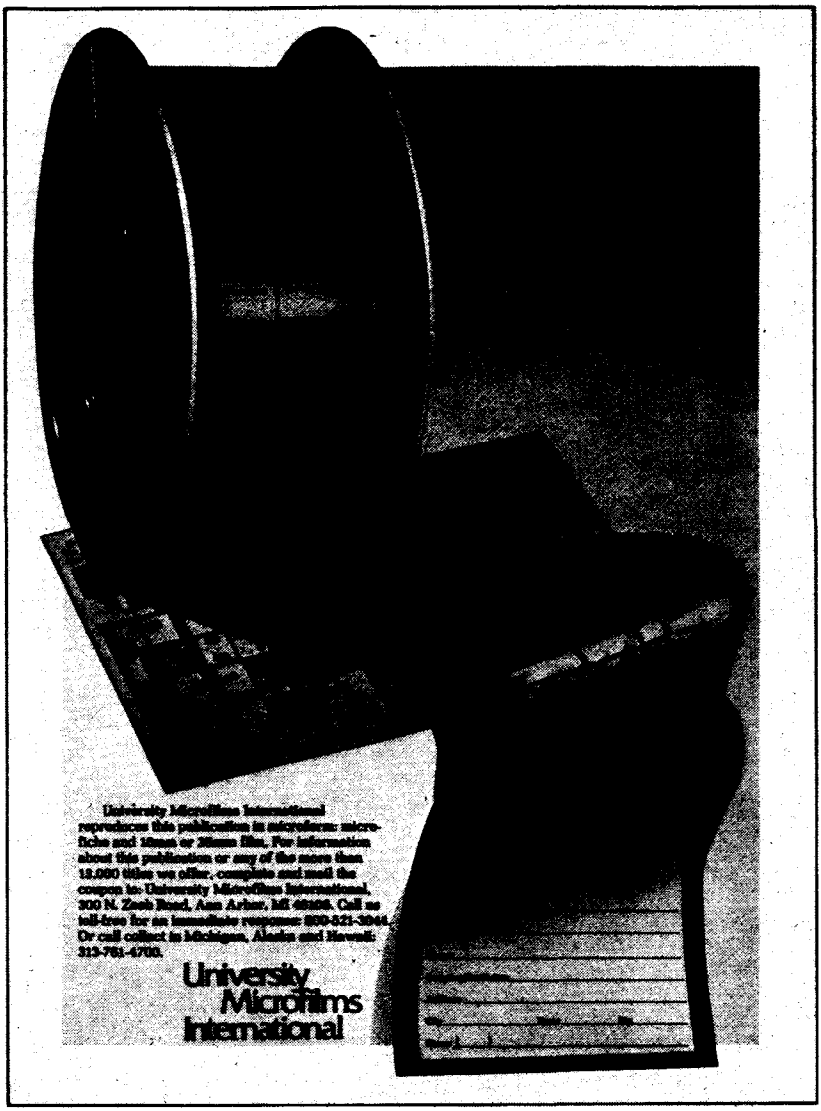
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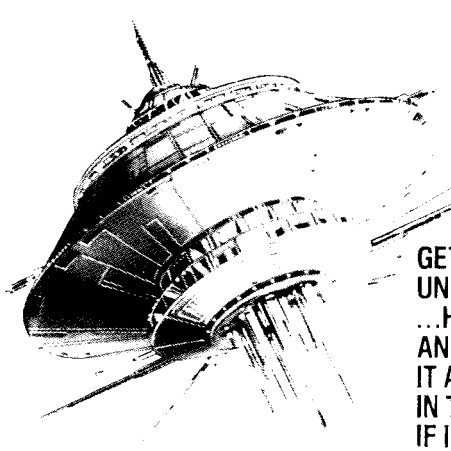

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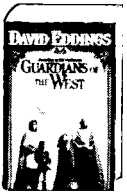

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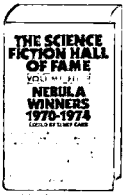

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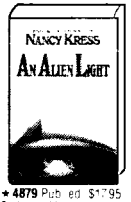

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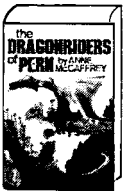

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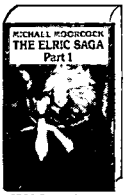

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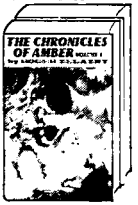

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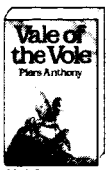

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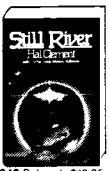

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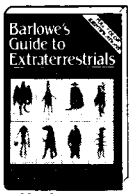

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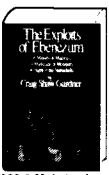

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